

PLANET STORIES

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—
THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES



20c

WAR-GODS OF THE VOID

by
HENRY KUTTNER

PRISON PLANET

by
BOB TUCKER

CITY OF THE LIVING FLAME

by
HENRY HASSE

VAMPIRE QUEEN

by
THORNTON AYRE

THE THOUGHT-MEN OF MERCURY

by
R. R. WINTERBOTHAM





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FOUR PLANET NOVELETS OF OTHER WORLDS

- WAR-GODS OF THE VOID** Henry Kuttner 2
 Ever Northward on Venus, Vanning strode—the mindless slave of the War-Gods' deadly virus.
- SPACE OASIS** Raymond Z. Gallun 30
 'Paradise Asteroid' it was called—but Norman Haynes meant it to be a spaceway's Hell.
- VAMPIRE QUEEN** Thornton Ayre 52
 Patrolman Curt Stanley trailed the Queen of the Starways into a space-trap of no-escape.
- STELLAR SHOWBOAT** Malcolm Jameson 78
 Behind the curtains of the Showboat of Space, Death waited for its cosmic entrance cue.

A WEIRD OUTSTANDING PLANET NOVEL

- CITY OF THE LIVING FLAME** . . . Henry Hasse 92

It was flame from outer space, and it was alive. Unshackled, it would bring doom to all mankind—and Jim Landor had just slain its keeper.

THREE PLANET SHORT STORIES

- QUEST OF THIG** Basil Wells 23
 Man's emotions are sometimes more deadly than terrible weapons.
- THE THOUGHT-MEN OF MERCURY** R. R. Winterbotham 44
 To plan escape, the prisoners had to think—and their captors could read minds.
- PRISON PLANET** Bob Tucker 69
 'Rat' was a criminal—yet he lived by a code that the Ancient Gods might honor.

P. S.'s DEPARTMENTS

- THE FEATURE FLASH** 51
 Meet Wilbur S. Peacock, whose Planet yarns you've met before.
- THE VIZIGRAPH** 118
 Kicks and knos, bombs and bouquets from the paying customers.

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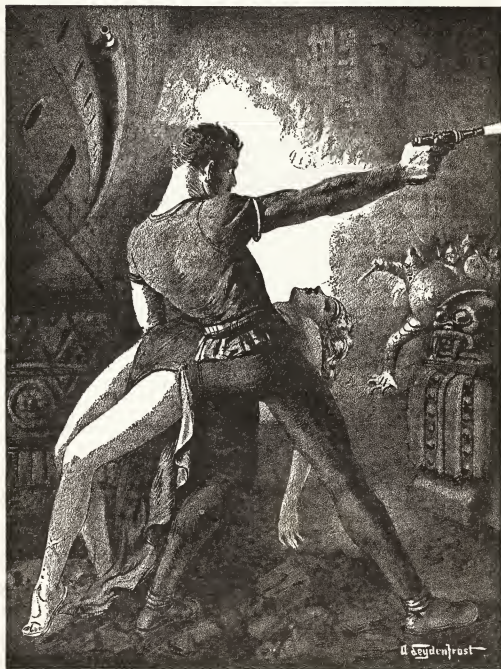
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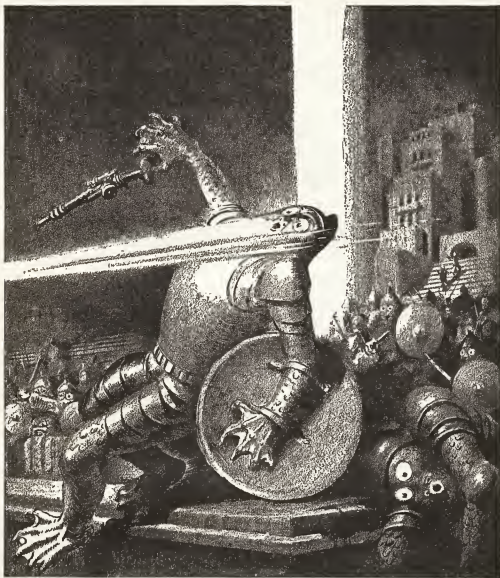
War-Gods of the Void

By HENRY KUTTNER

Jerry Vanning trailed the fugitive Callahan into the swampy wastes of Venus, Hell-Kingdom of the fabled War-Gods. He reached his goal — walking with the robot-strides of a North-fever slave.

Illustrated by Leydenfrost





Vanning sprinted forward, scooped up the girl, swerved back, and fired the full blast of his gun into the screaming face of the first Swamja.

EARTH Consul, Goodenow, tossed a packet of microfilms to Vanning, and said, "You're crazy. The man you're after isn't here. Only damn fools ever come to Venus—and don't ask me why I'm here, You're crazy to think you'll find a fugitive hiding on this planet."

Jerry Vanning, earth state investigator, moved his stocky body uneasily. He had a headache. He had had it ever since the precarious landing through the tremend-

ous wind-maelstroms of the pea-soup Venusian atmosphere. With an effort he focused his vision on the micro-projector Goodenow handed him, and turned the tiny key. Inside the box, a face sprang into view. He sighed and slid another of the passport-films into place. He had never seen the man before.

"Routine check-up," he said patiently. "I got a tip Callahan was heading here, and we can't afford to take chances."

The consul mopped his sweating, beefy face and cursed Venusian air-conditioning units. "Who is this guy Callahan, anyway?" he asked. "I've heard a little—but we don't get much news on the frontier."

"Political refugee," Vanning said, busy with the projector. "Potentially, one of the most dangerous men in the System. Callahan started his career as a diplomat, but there wasn't enough excitement for him."

The consul fumbled with a cigar. "Can you tell me any more?"

"Well—Callahan got hold of a certain secret treaty that must be destroyed. If he shows it in the right places, he might start a revolution, particularly on Callisto. My idea is that he's hiding out till the excitement dies down—and then he'll head for Callisto."

Goodenow pursed his lips. "I see. But you won't find him here."

Vanning jerked his thumb toward a window. "The jungle—"

"Hell, no!" the consul said decidedly. "Venus, Mr. Vanning, is *not* Earth. We've got about two hundred settlements scattered here and there; the rest is swamp and mountains. When a man gets lost, we wait a few days and then write out a death certificate. Because once an Earthman leaves a settlement, his number's up."

"So?"

"So Callahan isn't here. Nobody comes here," Goodenow said bitterly.

"Settlers do," Vanning remarked.

"Bloody fools. They raise herbs and *mola*. If they didn't come, Venus would be uninhabited except by natives in a few years. The North-Fever . . . You'd better watch out for that, by the way. If you start feeling rocky, see a doctor. Not that it'll help. But you can be put under restraint till the fever passes."

Vanning looked up. "I've heard of that. Just what—"

"Nobody knows," Goodenow said, shrugging hopelessly. "A virus. A filterable virus, presumably. Scientists have been working on it ever since Venus was colonized. It hits the natives, too. Some get it, some don't. It works the same way with Earthmen. You feel like you're cracking up—and then, suddenly—you go

North. Into the swamp. You never come back. That's the end of you."

"Funny!"

"Sure it is. But—ever heard of the lemmings? Little animals that used to make mass pilgrimages, millions of them. They'd head west till they reached the ocean, and then keep going. Nobody knew the cause of that, either."

"What lies north?"

"Swamp, I suppose. How should I know? We've got no facilities for finding out. We can't fly, and expeditions say there's nothing there but the usual Venusian hell. I wish—"

"OH-OH!" Vanning sat up, peering into the projector. "Wait a minute, Goodenow. I think—"

"Callahan? No!"

"He's disguised, but . . . Lucky this is a three-dimensional movie. Let's hear his voice." Vanning touched a button on the box. A low, musical voice said:

"My name is Jerome Bentley, New York City, Earth. I'm an importer, and am on Venus to investigate the possibilities of buying a steady supply of herbs—"

"Yeah," Vanning said tonelessly. "That's it. Jerome Bentley—nuts! That's Don Callahan! He's disguised so well his own mother wouldn't know him—best make-up artist in the System. But I've studied his records till I nearly went blind and deaf. I don't make mistakes about Callahan any more."

Goodenow blinked. "I'll be blowed. I've seen the man a dozen times, and I'd have sworn . . . well! If you're sure—"

"I'm sure," Vanning referred to the records. "Staying at the Star Palace, eh? Okay, I'll be pushing off."

"I'll go with you," the consul offered, and lifted his bulky body from behind the gleaming desk. Together the two men went out into the muggy Venusian day, which was now fading to a slow, blue dusk.

Venus did not revolve; it librated. There was no such thing as sunrise and sunset. But there was a very regular thickening and fading of the eternal cloud-banks that writhed overhead, approximating day and night. Despite the continual frantic disturbance of the atmos-

phere, the clouds were so thick that it was never possible to see the Sun.

Only the ragged, eye-straining movement of the grayness overhead, and the warm, humid wind that gusted against your sweating skin. And the sulphurous smells that drifted in from the jungle—odors of stagnant water and rottenness and things that grew unhealthily white.

Frontier town, Vanning thought, as he glanced around. Chicago must have looked like this, in the old days, when streets were unpaved and business was the town's only reason for existence. But Venus Landing would never grow into another Chicago. A few thousand souls, working under terrible handicaps, always fearing the North-Fever that meant death. . . .

Muddy streets, wooden sidewalks already rotting, metal buildings, of two stories at most, long, low hydroponic sheds, a dull, hot apathy that hung over everything—that was Venus Landing. A few natives shuffled past on their snowshoe feet, looking fat and wet, as though made out of wax that had begun to run.

The Star Palace was a down-at-the-heels plastic building, stained and discolored by the damp molds. Goodenow jerked his head at the clerk.

"Where's Leester?"

"North-Fever," the man said, worrying his lower lip. "This morning . . . we couldn't stop him."

"Oh, hell," the consul said hopelessly, turning to Vanning. "That's the way it is. Once the fever hits you, you go crazy. Do everything and anything to get away and head north. Leester was a nice kid. He was going back to Earth, next Christmas."

Vanning looked at the clerk. "A man named Jerome Bentley's staying here."

"He's somewhere around town. Dunno where."

"Okay," the consul said. "If he comes in, phone my office. But don't tell him we were asking."

"Yup." The clerk resumed his vague scrutiny of the ceiling. Vanning and Goodenow went out.

"WHERE now?"

"We'll just amble around. Hi!"

The consul hailed a ricksha, drawn by a native—the usual type of vehicle in Venus

Landing's muddy streets. "Hop in, Vanning."

The detective obeyed. His headache was getting worse.

They couldn't find Callahan. A few men said that they had seen him earlier that day. Someone had glimpsed him on the outskirts of the settlement.

"Heading for the jungle?" Goodenow asked quickly.

"He—yeah. He looked . . . very bad."

The consul sucked in his breath. "I wonder. Let's go out that way, Vanning."

"All right. What do you figure—"

"The fever, maybe," Goodenow grunted. "It strikes fast. Especially to non-natives. If your friend Callahan's caught North-Fever, he just started walking into the swamp and forgot to stop. You can mark the case closed."

"Not till I get that treaty back," Vanning growled.

Goodenow shook his head doubtfully.

The buildings grew sparser and ceased at the edge of the pale forest. Broad-leaved jungle growths sprang from moist black soil. The ricksha stopped; the native chattered in his own tongue.

"Sure," Goodenow said, tossing him a coin. "Wait here. *Zan-t'kshan*." His burly figure lumbered into the translucent twilight of the jungle. Vanning was at his heels.

There were footprints—many of them. The detective ignored them, moving in a straight line away from Venus Landing. Here and there were blazed *mola* trees, some with buckets hung to collect the dripping sap. The footprints grew fainter. At last only one set remained visible.

"A man. Pretty heavy-set, too. Wearing Earth shoes, not sandals like most of ours. Callahan, probably."

Vanning nodded. "He didn't come back by this route."

"He didn't come back," Goodenow said shortly. "This is a one-way trail."

"Well, I'm going after him."

"It's suicidal. But—I suppose I can't talk you out of it?"

"You can't."

"Well, come back to town and I'll find you an outfit. Supplies and a hack-knife. Maybe I can find some men willing to go with you."

"No," Vanning said. "I don't want to waste time. I'll start now." He took a few steps, and was halted by Goodenow's restraining grip.

"Hold on," the consul said, a new note in his voice. He looked closely into Vanning's face, and pursed his lips in a soundless whistle.

"You've got it," he said. "I should have noticed before."

"Got what?"

"The North-Fever, man! Now listen to me—"

Vanning's headache suddenly exploded in a fiery burst of white pain, which washed away and was gone, leaving his brain cool and . . . different. It was like a—like a *cold* fever. He found his thoughts were moving with unusual clarity to a certain definite point. . . . North. Of course he had to go north. That was what had been wrong with him all day. He had been fighting against the urge. Now he realized that it should be obeyed, instead.

He blinked at Goodenow's heavy, worried face. "I'm all right. No fever. I want to find Callahan, that's all."

"Like hell it is," the consul said grimly. "I know the symptoms. You're coming back with me till you're well."

"No."

Goodenow made a movement as though to pinion Vanning's hands behind his back. The detective writhed free and sent a short-arm jab to Goodenow's jaw. There was power behind that blow. The consul went over backwards, his head thumping against a white tree-bole.

He lay still.

VANNING didn't look at the motionless body. He turned and began to follow Callahan's trail. But he wasn't watching the footprints. Some instinct seemed to guide him.

North . . . North!

His head no longer hurt. It felt strangely cool, numb and stinging almost pleasantly. The magnetic pull drew him on. Deeper and deeper into the jungle. . . .

Distantly he heard Goodenow's shout, but ignored it. The consul couldn't stop him. But he might try. Vanning ran for a while, lightly and easily, till the

wilderness of Venus had swallowed him without trace. Then he slowed down to a walk. He would have been grateful for a brief rest, but he could not stop. Not Now. . . .

The fog closed in. Silver mist veiled the strange, ghostly forest. Then it was torn away as a gust of wind drove down from the upper air. Above, the clouds twisted in tortured writhings; but Vanning did not look up. Not once did he turn his head. He faced north . . . he plodded north . . . he slogged through mushy, stinking swamp that rose at times to his waist. . . .

A sane man would have skirted the bog. Vanning floundered across, and swam when he could no longer walk. Somewhere to the left he heard the coughing mutter of a swamp-cat's engine, but he did not see the machine. His vision was restricted to a narrow circle directly ahead.

Dimly he felt pain. The clinging, soft nettles of Venus ripped at his clothing and his skin. Leeches clung to his legs till they fell off, satiated. Vanning went on. He was a robot—an automaton.

In silence the pale forest slipped by in a fantastic procession. Lianas often made a tangled snare where Vanning fought for minutes before breaking through. Luckily, the vines had little tensile strength, but soon the man was exhausted and aching in every limb. Far above, the clouds had thickened and darkened into what passed for night on fog-shrouded Venus. But the trees gave a phosphorescent light of their own. Weird beyond imagination was the scene, with the bloody, reeling figure of the man staggering on toward the north—

North. Ever north. Until overtaxed muscles refused to bear the burden longer, and Vanning collapsed into exhausted unconsciousness.

He did not know when he awoke. Presently he found himself walking again. Nothing had changed. The jungle was denser, and the cool light from above filtered down once more. Only the light was cool. The air itself was sticky and suffocating.

He went on into hell.

Days and nights merged into a fantastic pattern of dull torture. Some dis-

tantly sane portion of his brain held back and watched, but could not help. Days and nights. There was no food. There was water, for as Vanning splashed through shallow pools he would bend his head to drink of the foul liquid. Once his feet crunched on the green-moulded bones of a human skeleton. Others had taken this way before him. . . .

TOWARD the end, a fleshless, gaunt thing that had once been a man dragged itself laboriously toward a range of mountains that lifted from the swamp toward the north. They extended to left and right as far as he could see, and seemed unscalable. But they were V-shaped, and Vanning headed toward the point of the V—the inner point. The terrible drive within him drove him on relentlessly.

That night a sulphurous crimson glow lit the sky beyond the mountains. Vanning did not see it. He slept.

By morning he was on his way again, staggering into the funnel of the peaks. They were bare rock, eroded by eons of trickling water from the clouds. He could not climb them, even had he possessed the strength. He went on, instead, into the narrowing valley. . . .

It ended in a sheer cliff of weathered stone. Vanning reeled toward the barrier. He could not return. The North-Fever drove him on remorselessly. He had to climb that wall of rock, or die. And he could not climb.

He fell, rose, and fell again. In the end he crawled. He crawled to the foot of the cliff and dragged himself upright. He fell forward, as though trying to press his body against the towering wall that lifted to the writhing grey clouds—

Fell—through the stone!

He toppled through the rock curtain as though it were non-existent! Instantly intense blackness closed around him. Hard stone was under him.

His mind was too dulled to wonder. He knew only that the way north was still open. He crept on through darkness, leaving a trail of blood behind him. . . .

The ground dropped from under him. He crashed down on a mound of moulded vegetation.

Before the shock had passed, the living dead man was moving again. He crawled forward until his way was blocked by a perpendicular wall. Gasping dry-throated sobs, he clawed at the barrier with broken, bleeding finger-tips.

To left and right, an arm's length away, were other walls. He was in a pit. The sane part of his brain thought: "Circle around! There may be some way out!"

But Vanning could not circle. He could only move in one direction. That was north. He fumbled blindly at the wall, until unconsciousness came at last. . . .

Twice again he awoke, each time weaker, and twice again he slept. The fever, having passed its peak, dwindled swiftly.

At last Vanning awoke, and he was sane. No longer did he feel the relentless urge to turn north. He lay for a little while staring into the blackness, realizing that he was once more in full command of his traitorous body.

There was little life left in him. His tongue was blackened and swollen till it filled his mouth. He was a scarecrow, nearly naked, his bones sharply defined through his skin.

It was an effort even to breathe. But death would not be long in coming—now. . . .

II

DYING is an uncomfortable business, unless a man is drugged or insensible. Vanning found it so. Moreover, he wasn't the sort of man who would give up without good cause. Weak as he was, nevertheless he was still too strong to lie in the dark, waiting.

Laboriously, he got to his hands and knees and commenced a circuit of the pit. He expected nothing. But, at the southern end of his prison, he was astounded to find a hole in the wall easily large enough to admit his body.

Feeling into the blackness, he discovered the smooth floor of a passage. Good Lord! It had been there all the time, during his tortured imprisonment in the pit. If he had only searched before—

But he could not have done so, of course. Not with the North-Fever flaming in his veins.

The tunnel might lead anywhere. All the chances were against its leading to safety. Sooner or later, there would probably be a dead end. Nevertheless, there *was* a chance. That chance grew brighter as Vanning's fingers discovered that the walls bore the marks of tools.

The tunnel had been made by—perhaps not humans, but at least by some intelligent race!

It grew higher as he went on, but Vanning was too weak to rise. He realized dimly that the passage made a sharp hairpin turn.

Through the dark the distant clangor of a bell roared.

Vanning hesitated, and then resumed his weak crawl. There was nothing else to do.

The ground dropped from beneath him. He went rolling and slipping down an inclined slide, to stop with a jolt against a softly padded surface. The shock was too much for his exhausted mind and body. He felt consciousness leaving him.

But he realized that it was no longer dark. Through a pale, luminous twilight he caught a glimpse of a mask hovering over him—the mask of no human thing. Noseless save for tiny slits, gap-mouthed, round-eyed, the face was like that of a fish incredibly humanized—fantastically evolved. A patina of green scales overlaid the skin.

The gong thundered from nearby. The monstrous mask dissolved into the blackness that swept up and took Vanning to its heart. Nothing existed but pain, and that, too, was wiped out by the encompassing dark. . . .

HE was very sick. Complete exhaustion had almost killed him. He was lying on a soft pallet, and from time to time the stinging shock of a needle in his arm told him that he was being fed by injection. Later, water trickled down his throat. His swollen tongue resumed its normal shape. Sleep came, tormented by dreams. The mask of the fish-like thing swam at him from gray shimmering light. It gave place to a great bell that roared deafeningly.

Then the face of a girl, pale, lovely, with auburn ringlets clustering about her cheeks. Sympathetic blue eyes looked in-

to his. And that, too, was gone. . . .

He awoke to find—something—standing above him. And it was no nightmare. It was the thing of his dreams—a being that stood upright on two stocky legs, and which wore clothing, a shining silver tunic and kirtle. The head was fish-like, but the high cranium told of intelligence.

It said something in a language Vanning did not know. Weakly he shook his head. The fish-being launched into the Venusian dialect.

"You are recovered? You are strong again?"

Vanning sought for words. "I'm—all right. But where am I? Who—"

"Lysla will tell you." The creature clapped its huge hands together as it turned. The door closed behind its mal-formed back, opening again to reveal the auburn-haired girl Vanning recognized.

He sat up, discovering that he was in a bare room walled with gray plastic, and that he was lying on a pallet of some elastic substance. Under a metallic-looking but soft robe, he was naked. The girl, he saw, bore over her arm a bundle of garments, crimson as the kirtle she herself wore.

Her smile was wan. "Hello," she said, in English. "Feel better now?"

Vanning nodded. "Sure. But am I crazy? That thing that just went out—"

Horror darkened the girl's blue eyes. "That is one of the Swamja. They rule here."

"Here? Where's here?"

Lysla knelt beside the bed. "The end of the world—for us, Jerry Vanning."

"How do you know my name?"

"There were papers in your clothes—what was left of them. And—it'll be hard to explain all this. I've only been here a month myself."

Vanning rubbed his stubby beard. "We're on Venus?"

"Yes, of course. This is a—a valley. The Swamja have lived here for ages, since before Earthmen colonized Venus."

"I never heard of them."

"None ever return from this place," Lysla said sombrely. "They become slaves of the Swamja—and in the end they die. New slaves come, as you did."

Vanning's eyes narrowed. "Hold on. I'm beginning to understand, a little. The

Swamja—those fish-headed people—have a secret city here, eh? They're intelligent?"

She nodded. "They have great powers. They consider themselves the gods of Venus. You see—Jerry Vanning—they evolved long before the anthropoid stock did. Originally they were aquatic. I don't know much about that. Legends . . . Anyway, a very long time ago, they built this city and have never left it since. But they need slaves. So they send out the North-Fever—"

"**WHAT?**" Vanning's face grayed. "Lysla—what did you say? The fever's artificial?"

"Yes. The virus is carried by microscopic spores. The Swamja send it out to the upper atmosphere, and the great winds carry it all over Venus. The virus strikes very quickly. Once a man catches it, as you did, he goes north. These mountains are a trap. They're shaped like a funnel, so anyone with the fever inevitably heads into the pass, as you did. They are drawn through the mirage, which looks like a wall of rock. No one who wasn't—sick—would try to go through that cliff."

Vanning grunted, remembering. "Keep talking. I'm beginning—"

"There isn't much more. The victims fall into the pits, and stay there till the fever has run its course. The Swamja run no risks of being infected themselves. After the sickness has passed, it's easy to find the way out of the pits—and all the tunnels lead to this place."

"God!" Vanning whispered. "And you say this has been going on for centuries?"

"Very many centuries. First the natives, and now the Earthpeople as well. The Swamja need slaves—none live long here. But there is always a supply trickling in from outside."

Thousands of helpless victims, through the ages, drawn into this horrible net, dragged northward to be the slaves of an inhuman race. . . . Vanning licked dry lips.

"Many die," the girl said. "The Swamja want only the strongest. And only the strongest survive the trip north."

"You—" Vanning looked at Lysla questioningly.

She smiled sadly. "I'm stronger than I look, Jerry. But I almost died. . . . I still haven't completely recovered. I—was much prettier than I am now."

Vanning found that difficult to believe. He couldn't help grinning at the girl's very feminine admission. She flushed a little.

"Well," he said at last, "you're not Venusian, I can see that. How did you come to get sucked into this?"

"Just bad luck," Lysla told him. "A few months ago I was on top of the world, in New York. I've no parents. My father left me a trust fund, but it ran out unexpectedly. Bad investments, I suppose. So I found myself broke and needed a job. There weren't any jobs for unskilled labor, except a secretarial position in Venus Landing. I was lucky to get that."

"You've got nerve," Vanning said.

"It didn't help. The North-Fever hit me, and the next thing I knew, I was . . . here. A slave."

"How many Earthmen are there here?"

"About a hundred. Not many are strong enough to reach the pass. And about the same number of Venusian natives."

"How many Swamja?"

"A thousand, more or less," Lysla explained. "Only the highest classes have slaves. Most of the Swamja are trained for the military."

"So? Who the devil do they fight?"

"Nobody. It's a tradition with them—part of their religion. They believe they're gods, and the soldiers serve as the Valkyries did in the Norse Valhalla."

"Two hundred slaves. . . . What weapons do the Swamja have?"

Lysla shook her head. "Not many. A paralysis hand-projector, a few others. But they're invulnerable, or nearly so. Their muscles are much tougher than ours. A different cellular construction."

Vanning pondered. He could understand that. The human heart-muscle is much stronger and tougher than—say—the biceps.

The girl broke into his thoughts. "Rebellion is quite useless. You won't believe that now, but you'll understand soon."

"Maybe," Vanning said tonelessly.

"Anyhow—what's next on the program?"

"Slavery." Her voice was bitter. "Here are your clothes. When you're dressed, you'll find a ramp leading down outside the door. I'll be waiting." She detached a metal plaque from the wall and went out. Vanning, after a scowling pause, dressed and followed.

THE corridor in which he found himself was of bare plastic, covered with a wavy bas-relief oddly reminiscent of water's ripples, and tinted azure and gray. Here and there cold lamps, using a principle unfamiliar to the man, were set in the walls. Radioactivity, he theorized, or the Venusian equivalent. He saw a ramp, and descended it to enter a huge low-ceilinged room, with doors at intervals set in the curving walls. One of the doors was open, and Lysla's low voice called him.

He entered a cubicle, not large, with four crude bunks arranged here and there. The girl was fitting the metal plaque into a frame over one. She smiled at him.

"Your dog-license, Jerry. You're 57-R-Mel. It means something to the Swamja, I suppose."

"Yeah?" Vanning saw a similar plaque over each of the cots. "What's this place?"

"One of the dormitories. Four to an apartment is the rule. You'll be lodged with three men who arrived a little while before you did—two Earthmen and a Venusian."

"I see. What am I supposed to do?"

"Just wait here till you're summoned. And Jerry—" She came toward him, placing her palms flat on his broad chest, her blue eyes looking up into his appealingly. "Jerry, please don't do anything foolish. I know it's hard at first. But—they—punish rebellious slaves rather awfully."

Vanning smiled down at her. "Okay, Lysla. I'll look around before I do anything. But, believe me, I intend to start a private little revolution around here."

She shook her head hopelessly, auburn curls flying. "It isn't any use. I've seen that already. You'll see it, too. I must go now. And be careful, Jerry."

He squeezed her arm reassuringly.

"Sure. I'll see you again?"

"Yes. But now—"

She was gone. Vanning whistled softly,

and turned to examine the room. Sight of his face in a mirror startled him. Under the stubbly growth of beard, his familiar features had altered, grown haggard and strained.

A razor lay handy—or, rather, a sharp dagger with a razor-sharp edge. There was a bar of gray substance that gave a great deal of lather when Vanning moistened it in the metal bowl that served as a wash-basin. He shaved, and felt much better.

His weakness had almost entirely gone. The medical science of the Swamja, at least, was above reproach. Nevertheless, he tired easily. . . . That would pass.

Who were his bunk-mates in this cubicle? Idly Vanning scrutinized their effects, strewn helter-skelter on the shelves. Nothing there to tell him. There was a metal comb, however, and Vanning reached for it. It slipped from his fingers and clattered to the plastic floor.

Vanning grunted and got down on his knees to recover the object, which had skidded into a dark recess under the lowest shelf. His fumbling fingers encountered something cold and hard, and he drew it out wonderingly. It was a flat case, without ornament, and clicked open in his hands.

It was a make-up kit. Small as it was, it contained an incredible quantity of material for disguises. Tiny pellets were there, each stamped with a number. Dye-stuffs that would mix with water. There was a package of *isoflex*, the transparent, extraordinary thin "rigid cellophane" of the day. There were other things. . . .

VANNING'S eyes widened. Two and two made an unmistakable four. Only one man on Venus would have reason to possess such a kit. That man was Don Callahan, whom Vanning had vainly pursued from Mars to Earth, and thence to Venus.

Callahan here!

But why not? He, too, had fallen victim to North-Fever. He had simply preceded Vanning in his drugged trip to this hidden kingdom.

"Who the hell are you?"

The harsh question brought Vanning to his feet, instinctively concealing the make-up kit in his garments. He stared at the

man standing on the threshold—a husky, broad-shouldered specimen with flaming red hair and a scarred, ugly face. Squinting, keen eyes watched Vanning.

"I'm—your new room-mate, I guess," the detective said tentatively. "Jerry Vanning's my name."

"Mine's Sanderson. Kenesaw Sanderson." The other rubbed a broken nose thoughtfully. "So you're new. Well, get this straight. Don't try any tricks with the Swamja or get any ideas."

Vanning tilted his head to one side. "I don't get it."

"New guys," Sanderson said scornfully. "They're always figuring it'll be easy to escape. They try it, and we all suffer. The Swamja are tough babies. Take it easy, do what you're told, and everything's okay. See?"

"Not quite." There was a roughness in Vanning's tone. "How long have you been here?"

"A few weeks, about. I don't recall exactly. What of it?"

"You don't look yellow. It just seems funny that you'd give up so easily. You look pretty tough."

Sanderson snarled deep in his throat. "I am tough! I'm also smart. Listen, Mr. Jerry Vanning, two days after I got here I saw the Swamja punish a guy who tried to escape. They skinned him alive! You hear that? And his bunk-mates—they weren't killed, but one of 'em went crazy. Those Swamja—it's crazy to try and buck them."

"They've got you out-bluffed already, eh?"

Sanderson strode forward and gripped Vanning's shoulder in a bruising clutch. "You talk too much. Trouble-makers don't go here. Get that through your head."

Vanning said gently, "Let go of me, quick. Or—"

"Let him go, Kenesaw," a new voice broke in. Sanderson grunted, but released the detective. He nodded toward the door.

"Got off early, eh, Hobbs?"

"A little." The man in the doorway was as big as Sanderson, but his face was benevolent, gentle, and seamed with care. White hair bristled in a ruff above his broad forehead. "A little," he repeated.

"Zeeth and I must go back tonight for the festival."

"*Sta*. We must go back tonight," said Zeeth, in the Venusian dialect. He appeared from behind Hobbs, a native of Venus, with the familiar soft plumpness and huge feet of the race. His dog-like eyes examined Vanning. "New?"

The detective introduced himself. He was secretly puzzled. One of these three men, apparently, was Callahan—but which one? None of them resembled the man Vanning had seen on the micro-projector back at Venus Landing. But, still—

III

ON impulse, Vanning took out the make-up kit and held it up. "I found this under the shelves. Yours, Hobbs? Or Sanderson?"

Both men shook their heads, frowning. Vanning glanced at the Venusian.

"Yours, Zeeth?"

"*Esta*, it is not mine. What is it?"

"Just a case." Vanning stowed it away, and sat down on one of the cots, wondering. As he saw it, he had two objectives to reach. First—escape. Second—bring in Callahan.

Not merely escape, though. He thought of Lysla. A slave . . . *damn!* And the other two hundred slaves of the Swamja . . . He couldn't leave them here.

But what could he do? Conquer the Swamja? The thought was melodramatically crazy. Perhaps alone he might contrive to escape, and bring a troop of Space Patrolmen to wipe out the Swamja. An army, if necessary.

The others, he saw, had seated themselves on the cots. Hobbs kicked off his sandals and sighed. "Wish I had a smoke. Oh, well."

Vanning said sharply, "Callahan!" His eyes flicked from one to another, and found nothing but surprise in the faces turned to him. Sanderson rumbled,

"What the devil are you jabbering about?"

Vanning sighed. "I'm wondering something. When did you boys get here?"

It was the mild-faced Hobbs who answered. "A couple of weeks ago, I believe. Within a few days of each other. Just before you arrived, in fact. But we

recovered long before you did. It was only a miracle that saved your life, Vanning."

"And before you three got here—any others come from outside? Lately, I mean."

"Not for months," Hobbs answered. "So I heard. Why?"

"Why? It proves that one of you is the man I'm after—Don Callahan. I'm a detective; I came to Venus to find Callahan, and—by accident—I followed him here. It stands to reason that one of you is the man I want."

Sanderson grinned. "Don't you know what the guy looks like?"

"No," Vanning admitted. "I've recognized him before by certain tricks he's got—the way he walks, the way he jerks his head around suddenly. Before he came to Venus, I found out, he went to an anthro-surgeon and got remodeled. A complete new chassis, face and body complete. Even got skin-grafts on his fingertips. In time the old prints will grow back, but not for months. Meantime, Callahan's pretty well disguised."

"Good Lord!" Hobbs said. "One of us—"

Vanning nodded. "When he came to Venus, he put a disguise over his new, remodeled face. That's gone now, of course. One of you three is Callahan."

Zeeth, the Venusian native, said softly, "I do not think the usual laws hold good here."

Sanderson roared with laughter. "Damn right! You expect to arrest your man and ask the Swamja to imprison him for you?"

Vanning shook his head, smiling crookedly. "Scarcely. I'm getting out of this place sooner or later, and Callahan's going with me. Later, I'll bring back troops and clean out the Swamja. But I'm not forgetting about Callahan."

Hubbs shrugged. "It isn't me."

"Nor me," Zeeth said. Sanderson only grinned.

Vanning grunted. "It's one of you. I'm pretty sure of that. And I'm talking to you now, Callahan. You'll be able to disguise your walk and your mannerisms, and I can't recognize your new face or fingerprints. But sooner or later you'll forget and betray yourself. Then I'll

have to take you back to Earth."

"You will forget," Zeeth said. "In a year—five, if you live, you will forget. Our people have legends of this land, where the gods live. Our priests taught that the North-Fever is sent by the gods. We did not know how true that teaching was. . . ." His bulbous face was grotesque in its solemnity.

VANNING didn't answer. His hope of tricking an admission from Callahan had failed. Well, there would be time enough. Yet obviously one of these three was the fugitive. Hobbs? Sanderson? Certainly not Zeeth—

Wait a bit! Suppose Callahan had disguised himself as a Venusian native? That would be a perfect masquerade. And the diabolical skill of the anthro-surgeon could have transformed Callahan into a Venusian.

Vanning looked at Zeeth with new interest. The native met his glance with stolid calm.

"One cannot argue with fate. Those who died on the way here are luckier. We must live and serve."

"I've got other ideas," the detective growled.

Zeeth gestured vividly. "Your race does not accept destiny, as ours does. We have from birth a struggle for existence. Venus is a hard mistress. But some of us live. Yet even then there is the shadow of the North-Fever. At any time, we know, the sickness may fall upon us. If it does, and we are not kept close prisoners, we go into the jungle and either die or—come here. My brother was very lucky. He had the fever three years ago, but I held him and called for help. My tribesmen came running and tied Gharza tightly, so that he could not escape. For ten days and nights the fever made him mad. Then it passed. The threat had left him forever. The North-Fever only strikes once, so Gharza was immune. I, too, am immune—but I consider myself dead, of course."

"Aw, shut up," Sanderson snapped. "You give me the leapin' creeps. Let's get some sleep. We've got to attend the festival tonight."

"What's that?" Vanning asked.

The mild-faced Hobbs answered him.

"A religious ceremony. Just do what you're told, and you'll be all right."

"Just that, eh?"

"Our people have learned to bow our heads to Fate," Zeeth murmured. "We are not fighters. Pain is horrible to us. You call us cowards. From your standards, that is true. Only by bowing to the great winds have we managed to survive."

"Shut up and let me sleep," Sanderson ordered, and relaxed his heavy body on a bunk. The others followed his example, all but Vanning, who sat silently thinking as hour after hour dragged past.

The door opened at last, and a Swamja stood on the threshold. He wore the familiar costume of the race, but there was an oddly-shaped gun in a holster at his side.

"Time!" he barked in the Venusian dialect. "Hasten! You—" He pointed to Vanning. "Follow me. The others know where to go."

The detective silently rose and followed the Swamja into the huge room. It was filled now, he saw, with natives and with Earthmen, hurrying here and there like disturbed ants. There were no other Swamja, however.

One of the Venusians stumbled and fell. He was a thin, haggard specimen of his species, and how he had ever survived the trip north Vanning could not guess. Perhaps he had been in this lost city for years, and had been drained of his vitality by weeks of arduous servitude. He fell. . . .

The Swamja barked a harsh command. The native gasped a response, tried to rise—and failed.

Instantly the Swamja drew his gun and fired. The Venusian collapsed and lay still. Vanning took a step forward, hot with fury, to find himself drawn back by Hobbs' restraining hand.

"Easy!" the other whispered. "He's dead. No use—"

"Dead? I didn't hear any explosion."

"You wouldn't. That gun fires a charge of pure force that disrupts the nervous system. It was set to kill just now."

The Swamja turned. "I must attend to this carcass. My report must be made. You, Zeeth—take the new slave to Ombara."

"I obey." The native bowed and touched Vanning's arm. "Come with me."

FOLLOWED by Sanderson's sardonic grin, Vanning accompanied the Venusian into a corridor, and up a winding spiral ramp. He found it difficult to contain himself.

"Good God!" he burst out finally. "Do those devils do that all the time? Plain cold-blooded murder?"

Zeeth nodded. "They have no emotions, you see. They are what you call hedonists. And they are gods. We are like animals to them. The moment we make a mistake, or are no longer useful, we are killed."

"And you submit to it!"

"There was a rebellion two years ago, I heard. Twenty slaves died to every Swamja. They are like reptiles—nearly invulnerable. And we have no weapons, of course."

"Can't you get any?"

"No. Nor would I try. Venusians cannot endure pain, you understand. To us, pain is worse than death."

Vanning grunted, and was silent as they passed through a curtained arch. Never would he forget his first sight of the Swamja city. It was like—

Like an ocean world!

He stood upon a balcony high over the city, and looked out at a vast valley three miles in diameter, scooped out of the heart of the mountains as though by a cosmic cup. Overhead was no sky. A shell of transparent substance made a ceiling above the city, a tremendous dome that couched on the mountain peaks all around.

Gray-green light filtered through it. An emerald twilight hazed the fantastic city, where twisted buildings like grottos of coral rose in strange patterns. It was a labyrinth. And it was—lovely beyond all imagination.

"Those—things—built this?" Vanning breathed.

"They knew beauty," Zeeth said. "They have certain senses we do not have. You will see. . . ."

From the exact center of the city a tower rose, smooth and shining as metal. It reached to the transparent dome and

seemed to rise above it, into the clouds of Venus.

"What's that?" Vanning asked, pointing. "Their temple?"

Zeeth's voice held irony. "Not a temple—a trap. It is the tube through which they blast the spores of the North-Fever into the sky. Day and night without pause the virus is blown upward through that tube, far into the air, where it is carried all over the planet."

The air was darkening, thickening. Here and there rainbow lights sprang into view. Elfín fires in an enchanted world, Vanning thought.

Through the grotesque city equally grotesque figures moved, to be lost in the shadows. The monsters who ruled here—ruled like soulless devils rather than gods.

"Come. We must hurry." Zeeth tugged at Vanning's arm.

Together they went down the ramp into one of the winding avenues. It grew darker, and more lights came on. Once Vanning paused at sight of a corroded metal structure in the center of a well-lighted park.

"Zeeth! That's a space-ship! A light life-boat—"

The Venusian nodded. "And it is well guarded, too. It crashed through the dome a century ago, I was told. All the men in it were killed. A space-wreck, I suppose."

Vanning was silent as they went on. He was visualizing what had happened in that distant past. A wreck in space, a few survivors taking to this life-boat and setting out, hopelessly, for the nearest world—believing, perhaps, that if they reached Venus, they would be saved. And then the tremendous atmospheric tides and whirlpools of the clouded planet, in which no aircraft but the hugest could survive. . . .

Vanning whistled softly. Suppose he managed to get into that space-boat? Suppose there was still rocket-fuel in the tanks, and suppose it hadn't deteriorated? Couldn't he blast up through the dome to freedom?

Sure—to freedom and death! No ship could survive in the Venusian atmosphere, certainly not this light space-tub, of an antiquated and obsolete design.

At one of the twisted buildings, Zeeth paused. The structure was larger than Vanning had imagined from above, and his eyes widened as he followed the Venusian up winding ramps, past curtained arches, till at last they stepped into a luxurious chamber at the top. Seated on a low tussock was a Swamja, fat and hideous, his bulging eyes glaring at the intruders.

"You are late," he said. "Why is that?"

Zeeth bowed. "We came as swiftly as possible."

"That may be. And this slave is new. Yet errors are not permitted. For your mistake, this—" A malformed hand rose, clutching a gun. "And this."

Instinctively Vanning tensed to leap forward, but a blast of searing fire seemed to explode in his body. He dropped in a boneless huddle, gasping for breath. Beside him he saw Zeeth, similarly helpless, fat face twisted in agony. Venusians, Vanning remembered, were horribly sensitive to pain; and even through his own torture he felt anger at the Swamja for meting out such ruthless justice.

But it was over in a moment, though that moment seemed to last for eternities. Zeeth stood up, bowed again, and slipped from the room, with a warning glance at Vanning, who also rose.

The Swamja raised his gross body. "Carry this tray. This flask and goblet—for my thirst. This atomizer—to spray on my face when I demand it. This fan for the heat."

Vanning silently picked up the heavy metal tray and followed the lumbering, monstrous figure out. He had an impulse to bring the tray down on the Swamja's head. But that wouldn't solve anything. He'd have to wait—for a while, anyway. A show of temper might cost him his life.

Along the twisting avenue they went, and to a many-tiered amphitheatre, where the Swamja found a seat in a cushioned throne. Already the place was filled with the monsters. Many of them were attended by human or Venusian slaves, Vanning saw. He stood behind the Swamja, ready for anything, and looked down.

In the center of the pit was a pool,

It was perhaps ten feet square, and blackly opaque. That was all.

"The spray."

Vanning used the atomizer on the scaly face of his master. Then he looked around once more.

Not far away, standing behind another Swamja, was Sanderson. The red-haired man met his eye and grinned mockingly.

Neither Hobbs nor Zeeth was visible. But Vanning could not repress a feeling of pleasure as he saw, several tiers down, the slim figure of Lysla, her auburn curls bare in the cool night air, a tray similar to his own held strapped to her slender neck.

Vanning's pleasure was lost in resentment. Damn these fish-headed Swamja!

"Fool!" a croaking voice said. "Twice I have had to demand the spray. Put down your tray."

Vanning caught himself and obeyed. The Swamja turned and leveled his gun. Again the blazing, brief agony whirled sickeningly through the detective's body.

It passed; silently he resumed his task. From time to time, he tended to the Swamja's wants. But he also found, time to glance at Lysla occasionally.

WHEN the ceremony began, Vanning could not tell. He sensed that the assembly had grown tenser, and noticed that the eye of every Swamja was focused on the black pool. But there was nothing else. Silence, and the deformed figures staring at the jet square in the center.

Was this all? It seemed so, after half an hour had passed. Not once had the Swamja he tended demanded attention. What the devil were the creatures seeing in that pool?

For they saw something, Vanning was certain of that. Once a shiver of pure ecstasy rippled through the Swamja's gross body. And once Vanning thought he heard a musical note, almost above the pitch of audibility. It was gone instantly.

Zeeth had said that the Swamja possessed other senses than those of humans. Perhaps those strange sense's were being used now. He did not know then, nor was he ever to know, the non-human psychology of the Swamja, or the purpose of the black pool. Yet Vanning

unmistakably sensed that here was something above and beyond the limitations of his own humanity.

He grew tired, shifting from foot to foot, but it seemed the ceremony would never end. He watched Lysla. Thus he saw her bend forward with a filled goblet—and, losing her balance, spill the liquid contents into the lap of the Swamja she tended.

Instantly she shrank back, her tray clattering to the floor. Stark panic fear was in her posture as she cowered there. There was reason. The Swamja was rising, turning, and in his huge hand was a gun. . . .

He was going to kill Lysla. Vanning knew that. Already he was familiar with the Swamja code that did not forgive errors. And as he saw the stubby finger tightening on the trigger-button, Vanning acted with swift, unthinking accuracy.

His hand closed over the flask on his tray, and he threw it unerringly. The fragile substance crashed into the face of the Swamja menacing Lysla, shattering into glittering shards. The being blinked and pawed at its eyes. In a moment—

Vanning jumped clear over his own Swamja and hurtled down the steps. His shoulder drove into the blinking monster beneath Lysla, and sent the creature head-over-heels into the lap of another of its race below. Vanning caught up the gun the Swamja had dropped. He turned to look into Lysla's frightened eyes.

"Jerry—" Her voice was choked. "Oh, no!"

Abruptly a crash sounded from above. Vanning looked up to see Sanderson swinging his metal tray like a maniac. The man's red hair was like a beacon in the strange light. He drove his weapon into the snarling face of a Swamja and yelled down at Vanning:

"Amscray! There's an oorday on your efdlay!"

Pig-Latin! A door on the left? Vanning saw it. With one hand he caught Lysla's arm, and with the other smashed the gun-butt viciously into the mask of a Swamja that rose up before him.

The creature did not go down. Its arms closed about Vanning. He reversed the gun and squeezed the trigger-button, but without result. Apparently the things

were immune to their own weapons.

The amphitheatre was in an uproar. In a flashing glance Vanning noticed that the black pool far below was curiously disturbed. That didn't matter. What mattered was the devil that was seeking to break his back—

Lysla tore the gun from Vanning's hand, firing it twice. The gnarled arms relaxed. But the two humans were almost hemmed in by the aroused Swamjas.

A burly body dived into the mob, followed by another one. Hobbs yelled, "Come on, kid! Fast!"

Hobbs and Zeeth! They, too, had come to the rescue. And none too soon!

The unexpected assault broke the ranks of the Swamja for an instant, and then the Earth-people were through, racing down a slanting corridor. They emerged outside the amphitheatre. Lysla gave them no time to rest. Footsteps were thudding behind them.

"This way. They'll kill us now if they catch us."

She sped into an alleyway that gaped nearby. Vanning saw Hobbs and Sanderson racing in pursuit. So Sanderson had got through, too. Good!

Zeeth?

The Venusian reeled against Vanning, his fat face contorted. "I'm—hit. Go on—don't mind me—"

"Nuts," the detective growled, and hoisted the flabby body to his shoulder. Zeeth had more courage than any of them, he thought. Weak of physique, hating pain, yet he had not hesitated to join his companions in a hopeless battle. . . .

IV

VANNING sped after the others, who had waited for him. After that it was a desperate hare-and-hounds chase, with Lysla leading them through the labyrinth of the city, her slender legs flying.

"You okay?" Vanning gasped as he ran shoulder to shoulder with the girl for a moment.

Her white teeth were fixed in her lower lip. "I . . . I shot at that Swamja's eyes. Blinded him. It's the only way . . . ugh!"

"Where now?" Hobbs panted, his white hair rippling with the wind of his racing. Sanderson echoed the question.

"Lysla? Can we—"

"I don't know. We've been heading north. Never been there before. Can't go south—gates are always guarded."

Hobbs panted, "There are only two ways out. The way we came in—guarded, eh?—and another gate at the north."

"We'll try it," Vanning said. "Unless we can get to that space-ship—"

Zeeth wriggled free. "Put me down. I'm all right now. The space-ship—that's guarded too. But there aren't any soldiers at the north gate. I don't know why."

Through the city a rising tumult was growing. Lights were blazing here and there, but the party kept to the shadows. Twice they flattened themselves against walls as Swamja hurried past. Luck was with them; but how long it would last there was no way of knowing.

Suddenly a great voice boomed out, carrying to every corner of the city. It seemed to come from the dome high above.

"Attention! No slaves will be permitted on the streets unless accompanied by a Swamja master! No quarter is to be given to the fugitives who blinded a guard! Capture them alive if possible—they must serve as an example. But show them no quarter!"

Lysla's face had paled. Vanning glanced at her, but said nothing. Things were bad enough as they were. Only Sanderson chuckled sardonically.

"Nice going, Vanning. How about Callahan now?"

The detective grunted. Zeeth panted, "I would—have preferred a—peaceful death. I do not—like torture."

Vanning felt a pang of sympathy for the fat little native. But he couldn't help him. Escape was the only chance.

"Here," Lysla gasped, pausing in the shadow of a tall building. "These outer houses are all deserted. There's the gate."

Across a dim expanse of bare soil it loomed, a wall of metal rising high above their heads. Vanning stared.

"No guards. Maybe it's locked. Still . . . I'm going out there. If there are any Swamja, they'll jump me. Then run like hell. Don't try to help."

Without waiting for an answer he sprinted across the clearing. At the door he paused, staring around. Nothing stirred. He heard nothing but the dis-

tant tumult from within the city. Looking back, he could see the faint elfin-lights glowing here and there, and the shining tube rising to the dome—the tube that was pouring out the North-Fever virus into the atmosphere of tortured, enslaved Venus.

And these were the gods of Venus, Vanning thought bitterly. Devils, rather!

He turned to the door. The locks were in plain sight, and yielded after a minute or two to his trained hands. The door swung open automatically.

Beyond was an empty, lighted tunnel, stretching bare and silent for perhaps fifty yards. At its end was another door.

Vanning held up his hand. "Wait a bit!" he called softly. "I'll open the other one. Then come running!"

"Right!" Sanderson's voice called back.

An eternity later the second door swung open. Vanning gave the signal, and heard the thud of racing feet. He didn't turn. He was staring out across the threshold, a sick hopelessness tugging at his stomach.

THE door to freedom had opened—mockingly. Ahead of him was the floor of a canyon, widening as it ran on. But the solid ground existed for only a quarter of a mile beyond the threshold.

Beyond that was flame.

Red, crawling fire carpeted the valley from unscalable wall to granite scarp. Lava, restless, seething, boiled hotly down the slope, reddening the low-hanging fog into scarlet, twisting veils. Nothing alive could pass that terrible barrier. That was obvious.

Zeeth said softly, "It will be a quicker death than the Swamja will give us."

"No!" Vanning's response was instinctive. "Damned if I'll go out that way. Or let—" He stopped, glancing at Lysla. Her blue eyes were curiously calm.

"The cliffs?" she suggested.

Vanning scanned them. "No use. They can't be climbed. No wonder the Swamja left this door unguarded!"

"Wonder why they had it in the first place?" Hobbs asked.

"Maybe there was a way out here once. Then the lava burst through . . . I've seen lava pits like this on Venus," Sanderson grunted. "They're pure hell. This

isn't an exit—except for a salamander."

"Then there's no way?" Lysla asked.

Vanning's jaw set. "There's a way. A crazy way—but I can't see any other, unless we can get out by the south gate."

"Impossible," Hobbs said flatly.

"Yeah. They'll have plenty of guards there now . . . I mean the space-ship."

There was a momentary silence. Zeeth shook his head.

"No ship can live in the air of Venus."

"I said it was a crazy way. But we might get through. We just might. And it's the only chance we have."

Sanderson scratched his red head. "I'm for it. I don't want to be skinned alive . . . I'm with you, Vanning. You a pilot?"

"Yeah."

"You'll have to be the best damned pilot in the System to get us through alive."

Lysla said, "Okay. What are we waiting for?" An indomitable grin flashed in her grimy, lovely face.

"Good girl," Hobbs encouraged. "We'd better get out of here, anyway. Back to the city."

They returned through the valve, without troubling to close the doors. "The Swamja might think we tried to get through the lava," Vanning explained. "We need all the false trails we can lay. Now—we'd better hide out for a bit till the riot dies down."

"Good idea," Sanderson nodded.

"These outer buildings are deserted—I told you that. We can find a hiding-place—"

Lysla led them into one of the structures, and into a room below the level of the street. "They'll search, but it'll take a while. Now I suppose we just wait."

Since there were no windows, the light Lysla turned on would not attract attention. Nevertheless, Vanning subconsciously felt the urge to remain in darkness.

He grinned mirthlessly. "I'm beginning to know how you feel, Callahan. Being a fugitive must be pretty tough."

Nobody answered.

The silence ran on and on interminably. Finally Sanderson broke it.

"We forgot one thing. No slaves are allowed on the streets tonight without a Swamja along."

"I didn't forget," Lysla said in a low voice. "There wasn't any other way."

"But we haven't a chance in the world to get through."

"I know that, too," the girl whispered. "But—" Abruptly she collapsed in a heap, her auburn curls shrouding her face. Under the red tunic her slim shoulders shook convulsively.

Sanderson took a deep breath. A wry smile twisted his mouth.

"Okay, Vanning," he said. "Let's have that make-up kit."

THE detective stared. Curiously, he felt no exultation. Instead, there was a sick depression at the thought that Sanderson—the man who had fought at his side—was Callahan.

"I don't—"

Sanderson—or Callahan—shrugged impatiently. "Let's have it. This is the only way left. I wouldn't have given myself away if it hadn't been necessary. You'd never have suspected me . . . let's have it!"

Silently Vanning handed over the make-up kit. Lysla had lifted her head to watch Callahan out of wondering eyes. Hobbs was chewing his lip, scowling in amazement. Zeeth was the only one who did not look surprised.

But even he lost his impassivity when Callahan began to use the make-up kit. It was a Pandora's box, and it seemed incredible that a complete disguise could issue from that small container. And yet—

Callahan used the polished back of it as a mirror. He sent Lysla for water and containers, easily procurable elsewhere in the building, and mixed a greenish paste which he applied to his skin. Tiny wire gadgets expanded his mouth to a gaping slit. Artificial tissue built up his face till his nose had vanished. *Isoflex* was cut and moulded into duplicates of the Swamja's bulging, glassy eyes. Callahan's fingers flew. He mixed, painted, worked unerringly. He even altered the color of his garments by dousing them in a dye-solution, till they had lost the betraying red tint that betokened a slave.

In the end—a Swamja stood facing Vanning!

"All right," Callahan said tiredly. "I'll

pass—if we keep out of bright lights. Now go out and help Lysla do guard duty. I'm going to disguise you all. That'll help."

Vanning didn't move as the others left. Callahan took an oilskin packet from his belt and held it out. Here's the treaty. I suppose you came after that."

The detective opened the bundle and checked its contents. He nodded. It was the vital treaty, which would have caused revolution on Callisto. Slowly Vanning tore it into tiny shreds, his eyes on Callahan. It was difficult, somehow, for him to find words.

The other man shrugged. "That's that. And I suppose you'll be taking me back to Earth—if we get out of this alive."

"Yeah," Vanning said tonelessly.

"Okay." Callahan's voice was tired. "Let's go. We haven't time to disguise everybody—that was just an excuse to give you the treaty. A private matter—"

He shuffled to the door, with the lumbering tread of the Swamja, and Vanning followed close at his heels.

The others were waiting.

Vanning said, "Okay. Let's start. No time to disguise ourselves. Stay behind—"

IN a close group the five moved along the avenue, Callahan in the lead.

The outlaw's disguise was almost perfect, but nevertheless he did not trust to it entirely. When possible, he moved along dimly-lighted streets, the four others keeping close to his heels. Once a patrol of Swamja guards passed, but at a distance.

"I'm worried," Callahan whispered to Vanning. "Those creatures have—different senses from ours. I've a hunch they communicate partly by telepathy. If they try that on me—"

"Hurry," the detective urged, with a sidewise glance at Lysla. "And for God's sake don't get lost."

"I won't. I'm heading for the left of the tube-tower. That's right, isn't it?"

Zeeth nodded. "That's it. I'll tell you if I go wrong. Careful!"

A Swamja was waddling toward them. Callahan hastily turned into a side street, making a detour to avoid the monster. For a while they were safe. . . .

Lysla pressed close to Vanning, and he squeezed her arm reassuringly, with a

confidence he could not feel. Not until now had he realized the vital importance of environment. On Mars or barren Callisto he had never felt this helplessness in the face of tremendous, inhuman powers—against which it was impossible to fight. Hopeless odds!

But luck incredibly favored them. They reached their destination without an alarm being raised. Crouching in the shadows by the square where the space-ship lay, they peered at the three guards who paced about, armed and ready.

"Only three," Lysla said.

Vanning chewed at his lip. "Callahan, you know more about locks than I do. When we rush, get around to the other side of the ship and unlock the port. It may not be easy. The rest of us—we'll keep the Swamja busy."

Callahan nodded. "I suppose that's best. We've only one gun."

"Well—that can't be helped. Lysla, you go with Callahan."

The blue eyes blazed. "No! It'll take all of us to manage the guards. I'm fighting with you."

Vanning grunted. "Well—here. Take the gun. Use it when you get a chance, but be careful. Zeeth? Hobbs? Ready?"

The two men nodded silently. With a hard grin on his tired face, Vanning gave the signal and followed the disguised Callahan as he walked toward the ship. Maybe the guards wouldn't take alarm at sight of one of their own race, as they thought. But the masquerade couldn't keep up indefinitely.

The sentries looked toward the newcomers, but made no hostile move. One of them barked a question. Callahan didn't answer. He kept lumbering toward the ship, his masked face hideous and impassive. Vanning, at his heels, was tense as wire. Beside him, he heard Zeeth breathing in little gasps.

Twenty paces separated the two parties—fifteen—ten. A guard croaked warning. His hand lifted, a gun gripped in the malformed fingers.

Simultaneously Lysla whipped up her weapon and fired. Once—twice—and the Swamja cried out and dropped his gun, pawing at his eyes. Then—

"Let 'em have it!" Vanning snarled—

and sprang forward. "Callahan! Get that port open!"

THE masked figure hesitated, gave a whispered sound that might have been a curse, and then sprinted around the side of the space-ship. Vanning didn't see him. His shoulder caromed into the middle of the second guard, and the two went down together, slugging, clawing, kicking.

The Swamja was incredibly strong. His mouth gaped at Vanning's throat. With an agile twist, the detective wrenched himself away, but by that time there was a gun leveled at his head. A wave of blazing agony blasted through Vanning's body—and was instantly gone. The weapon had not been turned up to the killing power.

The Swamja twisted the barrel with one finger, making the necessary adjustment. But Vanning hadn't been idle. His hands crossed over the gun, wrenched savagely. There was a crack of breaking bone, and the Swamja croaked in agony, his fingers broken.

He wasn't conquered—no! Ignoring what must have been sickening pain, he threw his arms around Vanning and squeezed till the breath rushed from the human's lungs. The detective felt himself losing consciousness. It was impossible to break that steel grip—

Once more the fangs gaped at his throat. Vanning summoned his waning strength. His left hand gripped the monster's lower jaw, his right hand the upper. Sharp teeth ripped his fingers. He did not feel them, nor the foul, gusting breath that blew hot on his sweating face.

He wrenched viciously, dragging the creature's mouth wide open—and wider yet!

A hoarse roar bubbled from the Swamja's throat. There was a sharp crack, and the malformed body twisted convulsively. The mighty arms tightened, nearly breaking Vanning's back. Then—they relaxed.

The Swamja lay still, his spine snapped. Vanning staggered up, hearing a roaring in his ears. It wasn't imagination. Across the square, monstrous figures came racing, shouting harshly—Swamja, dozens of them!

"Vanning!" Hobbs' voice croaked.

On the ground, three figures were wrestling in a contorted mass—Zeeth and Hobbs and the remaining Swamja. The monster was conquering. His bulging eyes glared with mad fury. Great muscles stood out on his gnarled arms as he tore at his opponents.

With a choking curse Vanning snatched up the gun his late enemy had dropped and sprang forward. His aim was good. The Swamja's eyes went dull as the destroying charge short-circuited his nerves.

The racing Swamja were dangerously close as Vanning bent, tearing at the monster's mighty hands. Useless!

He pressed his gun-muzzle into the Swamja's arm-pit and fired and fired again. Presently one arm writhed free. Vanning seized the two men, literally tore them from the creature's grip.

"The port!" Vanning gasped. "Get into—the ship!"

Hobbs lifted Zeeth and staggered around the bow. As Vanning turned to follow, he saw the slim body of Lysla lying motionless on the ground, in the path of the racing Swamja.

He sprinted forward, scooped up the girl in one motion, and swerved back, running as though all hell were at his heels. A croaking yell went up. Sickening pain lanced through Vanning, and he nearly fell. But the shock, though agonizing, wasn't permanent. Legs afire, the detective rounded the ship's bow and saw a circular hole gaping in the corroded hull.

He flung himself toward it. Through a crimson mist the masked face of Callahan swam into view. The man leaped out of the ship, caught up Lysla from Vanning's arms, and scrambled with her back through the port.

As Vanning tried to follow, he saw Callahan crouching on the threshold of the valve, an odd hesitancy in his manner. One of Callahan's hands was on the lever that would close and seal the ship. For a brief eternity the eyes of the two men met and clashed.

VANNING read what was clear to read. If Callahan closed the port now, leaving Vanning outside—he would be safe from the law. No doubt the man knew how to pilot a space-ship—

A shout roared out from behind Vanning. Callahan snarled an oath, seized the detective's hand, and yanked him into the ship. As a Swamja tried to scramble through the valve, Callahan's foot drove viciously into the monster's hideous face, sending him reeling back among his fellows.

Then the port clanged shut!

The port clanged shut, and the sudden silence of the ship was nerve-shattering in its instant cessation of sound.

Vanning managed to get to his feet. He didn't look at Callahan. Lysla, he saw, was still motionless. Hobbs was kneeling beside her.

"Lysla—she all right?" the detective rasped.

"Yes." Hobbs managed a weak grin. "She got in the way of a paralyzing charge—but she'll be all right."

"Okay." Vanning turned to the controls. They were archaic—in fact, the whole design of the ship was strange to him. It had been built a century ago, and rust and yellow corrosion was everywhere.

"Think it'll blast off?" Callahan asked as Vanning dropped into the pilot's seat.

"We'll pray! Let's see how much fuel—" He touched a button, his gaze riveted on a gauge.

The needle quivered slightly—that was all.

Callahan didn't say anything. Vanning's face went gray.

"No fuel," he got out.

There was a clanging tumult at the port, resounding from the outer hull.

"They can't get in," Callahan said slowly.

"We can't raise the ship," Vanning countered. "When we've used up all the air in here, we'll suffocate. Unless we surrender to the Swamja."

Hobbs gave a croaking laugh. "Not likely. There aren't any weapons here. The ship's been stripped clean."

Callahan said, "If we could break through the dome—"

"There might be enough fuel for that—if it hasn't deteriorated. But then what? We'd crash. Certain death. You know that."

Vanning clicked another button into its socket. "Let's see if the visi-plate works."

It did. On a panel before him a dim light glowed. It gave place to a picture, clouded and cracked across the middle. They could see the square, with the Swamja swarming into it in ever-increasing numbers, with the twisted buildings rising in the background, and the tower-tube shining far away.

Vanning caught his breath. "Listen," he said. "There's still a chance. A damned slim one—"

"What?"

The detective hesitated. If he took time to weigh this mad scheme, he knew it would seem utterly impossible. Instead, he snapped, "Brace yourselves! We're taking off for a crash landing!"

Callahan looked at Vanning's set, haggard face, and whirled. He picked up Lysla's limp body and braced himself in a corner. Zeeth and Hobbs did the same. Before any of them could speak, Vanning had swung the power switch.

He was praying silently that there was still a little fuel left in the chambers, just a little, and that it would still work. His prayer was answered instantly. With a roaring thunder of rocket-tubes the life-boat bulleted up from the ground!

The bellow died. There was no more fuel.

Vanning stared at the visi-plate. Beneath him the city of the Swamja was spread, the elfin lights glimmering, the coral palaces twisted like strange fungus growths. Automatically his hands worked at the corroded guide-levers that controlled the wind-vanes on the ship's hull.

The space-boat circles—swept around—

The shining tower-tube loomed directly ahead. Jaws aching, teeth clenched, Vanning held steady on his course. The ship thundered down with wind screaming madly in its wake.

The tube loomed larger—larger still. It blotted out the city. One glimpse Vanning had of the metal surface rising like a wall before him—

And the ship struck!

Rending, ripping, tearing, the space-boat crashed through the tube, bringing it down in thundering ruin. Briefly the visi-plate was a maelstrom of whirling shards. Then the glare of an elf-light raced up to meet the ship.

It exploded in flaming suns within Van-

ning's brain. He never knew when the ship struck.

V

HE looked up into Zeeth's eyes. Blood smeared the Venusian's fat face, but he was smiling wanly.

"Hello," Vanning said, sitting up.

Zeeth nodded. "The others are all right. Still unconscious."

"The crash—"

"Hobbs has a broken arm, and I cracked a rib, I think. But the ship's hull was tough."

Vanning stood up. His eyes were caught by the movement on the visi-plate, which had incredibly survived the shock of landing. He moved forward, bracing himself against the back of the pilot's chair.

The city of the Swamja lay spread beneath him. The ship had lodged itself high on one of the towers, smashing its way into a sort of cradle, and then rolling down till its bow faced north. In the distance the jagged metal of the tube stood up forty feet above ground level. The rest of it wasn't there, though gleaming, twisted plates of metal lay here and there in the streets.

And through the avenues shapes were moving. They were the Swamja, and they moved like automatons. They moved in one direction only—away from the ship.

As far as Vanning could see the Swamja were pouring through their city.

Zeeth said softly, "You are very clever. I still do not understand—"

Vanning shrugged, and his voice was tired. "The only way, Zeeth. I broke the tube that shot the North-Fever virus into the upper air. The virus was released within the city, in tremendous quantity. You know how fast it works. And in this strength—"

"Yes. It strikes quickly."

"Once you've had the fever, you're immune to it ever afterward. So the slaves won't suffer. Only the Swamja. They're getting a dose of their own medicine."

"They go north," Zeeth said. "Out of the city."

It was true. Far in the distance, the Swamja were pouring toward the north

gate, and vanishing through the open valves there. Nothing could halt them. The deadly virus they had created was flaming in their veins, and—they went north.

The did not walk; they ran, as though anxious to meet their doom. Through the city they raced, grotesque, hideous figures, unconscious of anything but the terrible, resistless drive that drew them blindly north. Through the north gate, into the pass—

Through the pass—to the lava pits!

Vanning's shoulders slumped. "It's nasty. But—I suppose—"

"Even the gods must die," Zeeth said.

"Yeah. . . . Well, we've work to do. We'll get food, water, and supplies, and head south for Venus Landing to get help. A small party will do. Then we can commandeer troops and swamp-cats to rescue the slaves from this corner of hell. We can get through to Venus Landing all right—"

"Yes, that will be possible—though difficult. Vanning—" Zeeth's eyes hooded.

"Yeah?"

"Callahan is not here."

"What?"

The Venusian made a quick gesture. "He awoke when I did. He told me to

say that he had no wish to go to prison—so he was leaving."

"Where to?" Vanning asked quietly.

"Venus landing. He left the ship an hour ago to get food and weapons, and by this time he is in the southern swamps, well on his way. At the Landing, he said, he would embark on a space-ship heading—somewhere."

"I see. He'll reach the Landing before we do, then. Before we leave, we'll have to get things in some sort of order."

BOTH Hobbs and the girl were moving slightly. Presently they would awaken—and then the work would begin. With the city emptied of the Swamja, it would be easy to organize the slaves, get up a party to march to Venus Landing—

Vanning's mouth twisted in a wry smile. So Callahan was gone. He wasn't surprised. Callahan would never know that the detective had awakened from the crash before any of the others—and had shammed unconsciousness till the fugitive had had time to make good his escape.

Vanning shrugged. Maybe he was a damn fool. Getting soft-hearted. . . .

"Okay," he said to Zeeth. "Let's get busy. We've got a job ahead of us!"



QUEST OF THIG

By BASIL WELLS

Thig of Ortha was the vanguard of the conquering "HORDE." He had blasted across trackless space to subdue a defenseless world—only to meet on Earth emotions that were more deadly than weapons.

Illustrated by Hoskins

Thig flipped the drive lever, felt the thrumming of the rockets driving him from the parent ship.



THIG carefully smoothed the dark sand and seaweed of the lonely beach over the metal lid of the flexible ringed tunnel that linked the grubby ship

from another planet with the upper air. He looked out across the heaving waters of the Sound toward Connecticut. He stared appraisingly around at the luxuriant

green growth of foliage further inland; and started toward the little stretch of trees and brush, walking carefully because of the lesser gravitation.

Thig was shorter than the average Earthman—although on Ortha he was well above the average in height—but his body was thick and powerfully muscled. His skull was well-shaped and large; his features were regular, perhaps a trifle oversize, and his hair and eyes were a curiously matching blend of reddish brown. Oddest of all, he wore no garments, other than the necessary belt and straps to support his rod-like weapon of white metal and his pouches for food and specimens.

The Orthan entered the narrow strip of trees and crossed to the little-used highway on the other side. Here he patiently sat down to wait for an Earthman or an Earthwoman to pass. His task now was to bring a native, intact if possible, back to the carefully buried space cruiser where his two fellows and himself would drain the creature's mentality of all its knowledge. In this way they could learn whether a planet was suited for colonization by later swarms of Orthans.

Already they had charted over a hundred celestial bodies but of them all only three had proven worthy of consideration. This latest planet, however, 72-P-3 on the chart, appeared to be an ideal world in every respect. Sunlight, plenty of water and a dense atmospheric envelope made of 72-P-3 a paradise among planets.

The explorer from another world crouched into the concealment of a leafy shrub. A creature was approaching. Its squat body was covered with baggy strips of bluish cloth and it carried a jointed rod of metal and wood in its paw. It walked upright as did the men of Ortha.

Thig's cold eyes opened a trifle wider as he stared into the thing's stupid face. It was as though he was looking into a bit of polished metal at the reflection of himself!

The Earthman was opposite now and he must waste no more precious time. The mighty muscles of the Orthan sent him hurtling across the intervening space in two prodigious bounds, and his hands clamped across the mouth and neck of the stranger. . . .

LEWIS TERRY was going fishing. For a week the typewriter mill that had ground out a thousand assorted yarns of the untamed West and the frigid desolation of the Northwoods had been silent. Lewis wondered if he was going stale. He had sat every day for eight hours in front of that shiny-buttoned bane of the typist, but there were no results. Feebly he had punched a key two days ago and a \$ sign had appeared. He hadn't dared touch the machine since.

For Mr. Terry, that hard-hitting writer of two-gun action, had never been further west of Long Island than Elizabeth, and he had promised his wife, Ellen, that he would take the three children and herself on a trailer tour of the *West* that very summer. Since that promise, he could not write a word. Visions of whooping red-skinned Apaches and be-chapped outlaws raiding his little trailer home kept rolling up out of his subconscious. Yet he *had* to write at least three novelets and a fistful of short stories in the next two weeks to finance the great adventure—or the trip was off.

So Lewis left the weathered old cottage in the early dawn and headed for his tubby old boat at the landing in an attempt to work out a salable yarn. . . .

"Hey!" he shouted as a naked man sprang out of the bushes beside the road. "What's the trouble?"

Then he had no time for further speech, the massive arms of the stranger had wound around him and two hamlike hands shut off his speech and his wind. He fought futilely against trained muscles. The hand clamping his throat relaxed for a moment and hacked along the side of his head. Blackness flooded the brain of Lewis, and he knew no more.

"**T**HERE it is," announced Thig, dropping the limp body of the captured Earthman to the metal deck-plates. "It is a male of the species that must have built the cities we saw as we landed."

"He resembles Thig," announced Kam. "But for the strange covering he wears he might be Thig."

"Thig will be this creature!" announced Torg. "With a psychic relay we will transfer the Earthman's memories and meager store of knowledge to the brain of Thig!

He can then go out and scout this world without arousing suspicion. While he is gone, I will take Kam and explore the two inner planets."

"You are the commander," said Thig. "But I wish this beast did not wear these clumsy sheathing upon his body. On Ortha we do not hamper the use of our limbs so."

"Do not question the word of your commander," growled Torp, swelling out his thick chest menacingly. "It is for the good of our people that you disguise yourself as an Earthman."

"For the good of the Horde," Thig intoned almost piously as he lifted Terry's body and headed for the laboratory.

Service for the Horde was all that the men of Ortha knew. Carefully cultured and brought to life in the laboratories of their Horde, they knew neither father nor mother. Affection and love were entirely lacking in their early training and later life. They were trained antlike from childhood that only the growth and power of the Horde were of any moment. Men and women alike toiled and died like unfeeling robots of flesh and bone for the Horde. The Horde was their religion, their love-life, their everything!

So it was that the bodies of the Earthman and the Orthian were strapped on two parallel tables of chill metal and the twin helmets, linked to one another by the intricacies of the psychic relay, put upon their heads.

For ten hours or more the droning hum of the relay sucked Terry's brain dry of knowledge. The shock upon the nervous system of the Earthman proved too violent and his heart faltered after a time and stopped completely. Twice, with subtle drugs they restored pseudo-life to his body and kept the electrical impulses throbbing from his tortured brain, but after the third suspension of life Thig removed his helmet.

"There is nothing more to learn," he informed his impassive comrades. "Now, let us get on with the plastic surgery that is required. My new body must return to its barbaric household before undue attention is aroused. And when I return I will take along some of the gleaming baubles we found on the red planet—these people value them highly."

An hour later, his scars and altered

cartilage already healed and painless, Thig again scraped sand over the entrance to the space ship and set out along the moonlit beach toward the nearest path running inland to his home.

Memory was laying the country bare about him, Terry's own childhood memories of this particular section of Long Island. Here was the place where Jake and Ted had helped him dig for the buried treasure that old 'Notch-ear' Beggs had told them so exactly about. Remembrance of that episode gave Thig an idea about the little lump of jewels in his pocket. He had found them in a chest along the beach!

He was coming up on the porch now and at the sound of his foot on the sagging boards the screen door burst open and three little Earth-creatures were hugging at his legs. An odd sensation, that his acquired memories labeled as pleasure, sent a warm glow upward from around his heart.

Then he saw the slender red-haired shape of a woman, the mate of the dead man he knew, and confusion struck his well-trained brain. Men had no mates on Ortha, sex had been overthrown with all the other primitive impulses of barbarism; so he was incapable of understanding the emotions that swept through his acquired memory.

Unsteadily he took her in his arms and felt her warm lips pressed, trembling, against his own. That same hot wave of pulsing blood choked achingly up into his throat.

"Lew, dear," Ellen was asking, "where have you been all day? I called up at the landing but you were not there. I wanted to let you know that Saddlebag Publications sent a check for \$50 for 'Reversed Revolvers' and three other editors asked for shorts soon."

"**S**HOULDA got a hundred bucks for that yarn," grunted Thig, and gasped.

For the moment he had been Lewis Terry and not Thig! So thoroughly had he acquired the knowledge of Terry that he found himself unconsciously adopting the thinking and mannerism of the other. All the better this way, he realized—more natural.

"Sorry I was late," he said, digging

into his pocket for the glittering baubles," but I was poking around on the beach where we used to hunt treasure and I found an old chest. Inside it I found nothing but a handful of these."

He flashed the jewels in front of Ellen's startled eyes and she clung, unbelieving, to his arm.

"Why, Lew," she gasped, "they're worth a fortune! We can buy that new trailer now and have a rebuilt motor in the car. We can go west right away. . . . Hollywood, the Grand Canyon, cowboys!"

"Uh huh," agreed the pseudo Lewis, memories of the ferocious savages and gunmen of his stories rendering him acutely unhappy. Sincerely he hoped that the west had reformed.

"I saved some kraut and weiners," Ellen said. "Get washed up while I'm warming them up. Kids ate all the bread so I had to borrow some from the Eskoes. Want coffee, too?"

"Mmmmmm," came from the depths of the chipped white wash-basin.

"HOME again," whispered Ellen as she stood beside Thig twelve weeks later and gazed tearfully at the weathered little gray house. She knelt beside the front stoop and reached for the key hidden beneath it.

"The west was wonderful; tremendous, vast and beautiful," she went on as they climbed the steps, "but nowhere was there any place as beautiful as our own little strip of sky and water."

Thig sank into a dusty old swing that hung on creaking chains from the exposed rafters of the porch roof. He looked down at the dusty gray car and the bulbous silvery bulk of the trailer that had been their living quarters for almost three months. Strange thoughts were afloat in the chaos of his cool Orthana brain.

Tonight or tomorrow night at the latest he must contact his two fellows and report that Earth was a planetary paradise. No other world, including Orthana, was so well-favored and rich. An expeditionary force to wipe the grotesque civilizations of Earth out of existence would, of course, be necessary before the first units of new Hordes could be landed. And there Thig balked. Why must they destroy these people, imperfect though their civilization

might be, to make room for the Hordes?

Thig tried to tell himself that it was the transmitted thoughts of the dead Earthman that made him feel so, but he was not too sure. For three months he had lived with people who loved, hated, wept and sacrificed for reasons that he had never known existed. He had learned the heady glory of thinking for himself and making his own decisions. He had experienced the primitive joy of matching his wits and tongue against the wits of other unpredictable human beings. There was no abrupt division of men and women into definite classes of endeavor. A laborer might think. Uncertainty added zest to every day's life.

The Orthana had come to question the sole devotion of the individual to the Horde to the exclusion of all other interests. What, he wondered, would one new world—or a hundred—populated by the Hordes add to the progress of humanity? For a hundred thousand years the Orthana civilization had remained static, its energies directed into certain well-defined channels. They were mindless bees maintaining their vast mechanical hives.

There was that moment on the brink of the Grand Canyon when Ellen had caught his arm breathlessly at all the beauty spread away there beneath them. There were mornings in the desert when the sun painted in lurid red the peaks above the harsh black-and-whites of the sagebrush and cactus slopes. There was the little boy, his body burning with fever, who nestled trustingly against his tense man's body and slept—the son of Ellen and the man he had destroyed.

Thig groaned. He was a weakling to let sentimentality so get the better of his judgment. He would go now to the spaceship and urge them to blast off for Orthana. He sprang off the porch and strode away down the road toward the beach.

The children ran to him; wanted to go along. He sent them away harshly but they smiled and waved their brown little hands. Ellen came to the door and called after him.

"Hurry home, dear," she said. "I'll have a bite ready in about an hour."

He dared not say anything, for his voice would have broken and she would have

known something was wrong. She was a very wise sort of person when something was troubling him. He waved his stubby paw of a hand to show that he had heard, and blindly hurried toward the Sound.

Oddly enough, as he hurried away along the narrow path through the autumn woods, his mind busied itself with a new epic of the west that lived no longer. He mentally titled it: "Rustlers' Riot" and blocked in the outlines of his plot. One section of his brain was that of the careless author of gunslinging yarns, a section that seemed to be sapping the life from his own brain. He knew that the story would never be written, but he toyed with the idea.

So far had Thig the emotionless, robot-being from Ortha drifted from the unquestioning worship of the Horde!

"YOU have done well," announced Torp when Thig had completed his report on the resources and temperatures of various sections of Terra. "We now have located three worlds fit for colonization and so we will return to Ortha at once.

"I will recommend the conquest of this planet, 72-P-3 at once and the complete destruction of all biped life upon it. The mental aberrations of the barbaric natives might lead to endless complications if they were permitted to exist outside our ordered way of life. I imagine that three circuits of the planet about its primary should prove sufficient for the purposes of complete liquidation."

"But why," asked Thig slowly, "could we not disarm all the natives and exile them on one of the less desirable continents, Antarctica for example or Siberia? They are primitive humans even as our race was once a race of primitives. It is not our duty to help to attain our own degree of knowledge and comfort?"

"Only the good of the Horde matters!" shouted Torp angrily. "Shall a race of feeble-witted beasts, such as these Earthmen, stand in the way of a superior race? We want their world, and so we will take it. The Law of the Horde states that all the universe is ours for the taking."

"Let us get back to Ortha at once, then," gritted out Thig savagely. "Never again do I wish to set foot upon the soil of this mad planet. There are forces at work upon

Earth that we of Ortha have long forgotten."

"Check the blood of Thig for disease, Kam," ordered Torp shortly. "His words are highly irrational. Some form of fever perhaps native to this world. While you examine him I will blast off for Ortha."

Thig followed Kam into the tiny laboratory and found a seat beside the squat scientist's desk. His eyes roamed over the familiar instruments and gauges, each in its own precise position in the cases along the walls. His gaze lingered longest on the stubby black ugliness of a decomposition blaster in its rack close to the deck. A blast of the invisible radiations from that weapon's hot throat and flesh or vegetable fiber rotted into flaky ashes.

The ship trembled beneath their feet; it tore free from the feeble clutch of the sand about it, and they were rocketing skyward. Thig's broad fingers bit deep into the unyielding metal of his chair. Suddenly he knew that he must go back to Earth, back to Ellen and the children of the man he had helped destroy. He loved Ellen, and nothing must stand between them! The Hordes of Ortha must find some other world, an empty world—this planet was not for them.

"Turn back!" he cried wildly. "I must go back to Earth. There is a woman there, helpless and alone, who needs me! The Horde does not need this planet."

Kam eyed him coldly and lifted a shining hypodermic syringe from its case. He approached Thig warily, aware that disease often made a maniac of the finest members of the Horde.

"No human being is more important than the Horde," he stated baldly. "This woman of whom you speak is merely one unit of the millions we must eliminate for the good of the Horde."

Then it was that Thig went berserk. His fists slashed into the thick jaw of the scientist and his fingers ripped at the hard cords overlying the Orthans' vital throat tubes. His fingers and thumb gouged deep into Kam's startled throat and choked off any cry for assistance before it could be uttered.

Kam's hand swept down to the holster swung from his intricate harness and dragged his blaster from it. Thig's other hand clamped over his and for long mo-

ments they swayed there, locked together in silent deadly struggle. The fate of a world hung in the balance as Kam's other hand fought against that lone arm of Thig.

THE scales swung in favor of Kam. Slowly the flaring snout of his weapon tilted upward until it reached the level of Thig's waist. Thig suddenly released his grip and dragged his enemy toward him. A sudden reversal of pressure on Kam's gun hand sent the weapon swivelling about full upon its owner's thick torso. Thig's fingers pressed down upon Kam's button finger, down upon the stud set into the grip of the decomposition blaster, and Kam's muscles turned to water. He shrieked.

Before Thig's eyes half of his comrade's body sloughed away into foul corruption that swiftly gave way to hardened blobs of dessicated matter. Horror for what he had done—that he had slain one of his own Horde—made his limbs move woodenly. All of his thoughts were dulled for the moment. Painfully slow, he turned his body around toward the control blister, turned around on leaden feet, to look full into the narrowed icy eyes of his commander.

He saw the heavy barrel of the blaster slashing down against his skull but he could not swing a fraction of an inch out of the way. His body seemed paralyzed. This was the end, he thought as he waited stupidly for the blow to fall, the end for Ellen and the kids and all the struggling races of Earth. He would never write another cowboy yarn—they would all be dead anyhow soon.

Then a thunderclap exploded against his head and he dropped endlessly toward the deck. Blows rained against his skull. He wondered if Torp would ever cease to hammer at him and turn the deadly ray of the weapon upon him. Blood throbbed and pounded with every blow. . . .

BAM, Bam, Bam, the blood pounded in his ears. Like repeated blows of a hammer they shook his booming head. No longer was Torp above him. He was in the corner of the laboratory, a crumpled blood-smeared heap of bruised flesh and bone. He was unfettered and the blood was caked upon his skull and in his matted hair. Torp must have thought he had

killed him with those savage blows upon the head.

Even Torp, thought Thig ruefully, gave way to the primitive rage of his ancestors at times; but to that very bit of unconscious atavism he now owed his life. A cool-headed robot of an Orthan would have efficiently used the blaster to destroy any possibility of remaining life in his unconscious body.

Thig rolled slowly over so that his eye found the door into the control room. Torp would be coming back again to dispose of their bodies through the refuse lock. Already the body of Kam was gone. He wondered why he had been left until last. Perhaps Torp wished to take cultures of his blood and tissues to determine whether a disease was responsible for his sudden madness.

The cases of fragile instruments were just above his head. Association of memories brought him the flash of the heavy blaster in its rack beneath them. His hand went up and felt the welcome hardness of the weapon. He tugged it free.

In a moment he was on his knees crawling across the plates of the deck toward the door. Halfway across the floor he collapsed on his face, the metal of the gun making a harsh clang. He heard the feet of Torp scuffle out of silence and a choked cry in the man's throat squalled out into a senseless whinny.

Thig raised himself up on a quivering elbow and slid the black length of the blaster in front of him. His eyes sought the doorway and stared full into the glaring vacant orbs of his commander. Torp leaned there watching him, his breath gurgling brokenly through his deep-bitten lips. The clawing marks of nails, fingernails, furrowed his face and chest. He was a madman!

The deadly attack of Thig; his own violent avenging of Kam's death, and now the apparent return of the man he had killed come to life had all served to jolt his rigidly trained brain from its accustomed groove. The shock had been too much for the established thought-processes of the Orthan.

So Thig shot him where he stood, mercifully, before that vacant mad stare set him, too, to gibbering and shrieking. Then he stepped over the skeleton-thing

that had been Torp, using the new strength that victory had given him to drive him along.

He had saved a world's civilization from extinction! The thought sobered him; yet, somehow, he was pleased that he had done so. After all, it had been the Earthwoman and the children he had been thinking of while he battled Kam, a selfish desire to protect them all.

He went to the desk where Torp had been writing in the ship's log and read the last few nervously scrawled lines:

Planet 72-P-3 unfit for colonization. Some pernicious disease that strikes at the brain centers and causes violent insanity is existent there. Thig, just returned from a survey of the planet, went mad and destroyed Kam. In turn I was forced to slay him. But it is not ended. Already I feel the insidious virus of. . .

And there his writing ended abruptly.

Thig nodded. That would do it. He set the automatic pilot for the planet Ortha. Unless a rogue asteroid or a comet crossed the ship's path she would return safely to Ortha with that mute warning of danger on 72-P-3. The body of Torp would help to confirm his final message.

Then Thig crossed the cabin to the auxiliary life boat there, one of a half-dozen space ships in miniature nested within the great ship's hull, and cut free from the mother vessel.

He flipped the drive lever, felt the thrumming of the rockets driving him from the parent ship. The sensation of free flight against his new body was strangely exhilarating and heady. It was the newest of the emotions he had experienced on Earth since that day, so many months before, when he had felt the warmth of Ellen's lips tight against his.

He swung about to the port, watched the flaming drive-rockets of the great exploratory ship hurl it toward far-away Ortha, and there was no regret in his mind that he was not returning to the planet of his first existence.

He thought of the dull greys and blacks of his planet, of the monotonous routine of existence that had once been his—and his heart thrilled to the memories of the starry nights and perfect exciting days he had spent on his three month trip over Earth.

He made a brief salute to the existence he had known, turned with a tiny sigh, and his fingers made brief adjustments in the controls. The rocket-thrum deepened, and the thin whistle of tenuous air clutching the ship echoed through the hull-plates.

He thought of many things in those few moments. He watched the roundness of Earth flatten out, then take on the cup-like illusion that all planets had for an incoming ship. He reduced the drive of his rockets to a mere whisper, striving to control the impatience that crowded his mind.

He shivered suddenly, remembering his utter callousness the first time he had sent a space ship whipping down toward the hills and valleys below. And there was a sickness within him when he fully realized that, despite his acquired memory and traits, he was an alien from outer space.

He fingered the tiny scars that had completely obliterated the slight differences in his appearance from an Earthman's, and his fingers trembled a bit, as he bent and stared through the vision port. He said a brief prayer in his heart to a God whose presence he now felt very deeply. There were tears in the depths of his eyes, then, and memories were hot, bitter pains.

EARTH was not far below him. As he let gravity suck him earthward, he heaved a gasp of relief. He was no longer Thig, a creature of a Horde's creation, but Lewis Terry, writer of lurid gun-smoking tales of the West. He must remember that always. He had destroyed the real Terry and now, for the rest of his life, he must make up to the dead man's family.

The knowledge that Ellen's love was not really meant for him would be a knife twisting in his heart but for her sake he must endure it. Her dreams and happiness must never be shattered.

The bulge of Earth was flattening out now and he could see the outlines of Long Island in the growing twilight.

A new plot was growing in the brain of Lewis Terry, a yarn about a cowboy suddenly transported to another world. He smiled ironically. He had seen those other worlds. Perhaps some day he would write about them. . . .

He was Lewis Terry! He must remember that!

SPACE OASIS

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

Space-weary rocketmen dreamed of an asteroid Earth. But power-mad Norman Haynes had other plans — and he spread his control lines in a doom-net for that oasis in space.

Illustrated by Morey

I FOUND Nick Mavrocordatus scanning the bulletin board at the Haynes Shipping Office on Enterprize Asteroid, when I came back with a load of ore from the meteor swarms.

He looked at me with that funny curve on his lips, that might have been called a smile, and said, "Hi, Chet," as casually as though we'd seen each other within the last twenty-four hours. . . . "Queer laws they got in the Space Code, eh? The one that insists on the posting of casualty lists, for instance. You'd think the Haynes Company would like to keep such things dark."

I didn't say anything for a moment, as my eyes went down those narrow, typed columns on the bulletin board: Joe Tiffany—dead—space armor defect. . . . Hermann Schmidt and Lan Harool—missing—vicinity of Pallas. . . . Irvin Davidson—hospitalized—space blindness. . . .

There was a score of names of men I didn't know, in that space-blindness column. And beneath, there was a much longer line of common Earth-born and Martian John-Henrys, with the laconic tag added at the top—*hospitalized—mental*. Ditto marks saved the trouble of retyping the tag itself, after each name.

One name caught my eye.

Ted Bradley was listed there. Ted Bradley from St. Louis, my and Nick Mavrocordatus' home town. It gave me a little jolt, and a momentary lump somewhere under my Adam's Apple. I knew the state Bradley would be in. Not a man any more—no longer keen and sure of himself. A year out here among the asteroids had changed all that forever.

Shoving from one drifting, meteoric lump to another, in a tiny space boat.

Chipping at those huge, grey masses with a test hammer that makes no sound in the voidal vacuum. Crawling over jagged surfaces, looking for ores of radium and tantalum and carium—stuff fabulously costly enough to be worth collecting, for shipment back to the industries of Earth, at fabulous freight rates, on rocket craft whose pay-load is so small, and where every gram of mass is at premium.

No, Ted Bradley would never be himself again. Like so many others. It was an old story. The almost complete lack of gravity, out here among the asteroids, had disturbed his nerve-centers, while cosmic rays seeped through his leaded helmet, slowly damaging his brain.

There was more to it than the airlessness, and absence of weight, and the cosmic rays. There was the utter silence, and the steady stars, and the blackness between them, and the blackness of the shadows, like the fangs of devils in the blazing sunshine. All of this was harder than the soul of any living being.

And on top of all this, there was usually defeat and shattered hope. Not many futures were made among the asteroids by those who dug for their living. Prices of things brought from Earth in fragile, costly space craft were too high. Moments of freedom and company were too rare, and so, hard-won wealth ran like water.

Ted Bradley was gone from us. Call him a corpse, really. In the hospital here on Enterprize, he was either a raving maniac, or else—almost worse—he was like a little child, crooning over the wonder of his fingers.

It got me for a second. But then I shrugged. I'd been out here two years.



"Cracking up, eh, Wallace?" Norman Haynes sneered.

An old timer. I knew how empires were built. I knew, better than most, how to get along out here. Be fatalistic and casual. Don't worry. Don't plan too much. That way I'd stayed right-side-up. I'd even had quite a lot of fun, being an adventurer, against that gigantic, awesome background of the void.

I didn't consider my thoughts about Ted Bradley worth mentioning to Nick Mavrocordatus. He was probably thinking

about Ted, too, and that was enough.

"Come on, Nick," I said. "They've got my ore weighed and analyzed for content in the hopper rooms. I'm going into the pay-office and get my dough. Then we might shove off to the Iridium Circle, or some other joint, and have us a time, huh?"

Nick laughed, then, good-naturedly, triumphantly. I gave him a sharp glance, noticing that under his faintly bitter

air, there seemed to be something big. Some idea that gripped him, confused him, thrilled him. His small, knotty body was taut with it; his dark eyes, under the curly black hair that straggled down his forehead, glowed with a far-away look.

Of course, he was still very young—only twenty-two, which to me, at twenty-five, with a six-months edge of asteroid-lore beyond his year and a half of experience, made me feel old and disillusioned and practical, by comparison.

"All right, Chet," he said at last. "Let's get your money. Celebrations are in order—on me, though. But I guess we'd better soft-pedal them some. I've got a lot to tell you, and more to do."

I didn't give his words proper attention, just then. I swaggered into the pay office, where a couple of stenogs clicked typewriters, and where Norman Haynes, acting head of the Haynes Shipping Company, sat at his desk, under the painted portrait of his uncle, that grizzled old veteran, Art Haynes, who had retired years ago, and who now lived on Earth.

I knew old Art only by reputation. But that was enough to arouse my deep respect. Between nephew and uncle there was a difference as great as between night and day. The one, the founder, unafraid to dirty his hands and face death, and build for the future. Tough, yes, but square, and willing to pay bonuses to miners even while he'd been struggling to expand his company, and open up vast, new space trails. The other, an arm-chair director, holding on tight, now, to an asteroid empire, legally free of his control, but whose full resources came eventually into his hands at the expense of others, because he controlled the fragile, difficult supply lines.

At sight of me, Norman Haynes arose from his chair. He was very tall, and he wore an immaculate business suit. He was smooth-shaven, with a neat haircut, in contrast to my shaggy locks and bristles. Across his face spread a smile of greeting as broad as it was false.

"Well—Chet Wallace:" he said. "You've done some marvelous meteor mining, this trip: Nineteen hundred dollars' worth of radium-actinium ore! Splendid! Maybe you'll do even better next time!"

YEAH! I'd seen and heard Norman Haynes act and talk like this before. He handed out the same line to all of the miners. To me it was forever irritating. Always I'd wanted to turn that long nose of his back against his right ear. He and his words were both phony. Always he used a condescending tone. And I felt that he was a bloodsucker. My anger was further increased, now, because of Ted Bradley.

I guess I sneered. "Don't worry about those nineteen hundred dollars, Mr. Haynes," I said. "When I buy grub, and a few things I need, and have a little blow, you'll have the money all back."

Beside the office railing there was a machine—a cigarette vendor. Into a roller system at its top, I inserted two five-dollar bills from my pay. There was a faint whir as the robot photographic apparatus checked the denominations of the notes, and proved their authenticity. Two packs of cigarettes slipped down into the receiver arrangement.

"Five bucks apiece, Haynes," I said. "At a fair shipping rate, cigarettes brought out from Earth aren't worth much more than three bucks. But you're just a dirty chiseller, not satisfied with a fair profit. Costs here in the asteroids are naturally plenty steep; but you make a bad situation worse by charging at least twenty-five per-cent more than's reasonable! A Venutian stink-louse is more of a gentleman than you are, Haynes!"

Oh, there was a Satanic satisfaction in feeling the snarl in my throat, and seeing Haynes' face go purplish red, and then white with surprise and fury. Some other space men had entered the pay office, and they hid their grins of pleasure behind calloused palms.

First I thought Norman Haynes would swing at me. But he didn't. He lacked that kind of nerve. He began to sputter and curse under his breath, and I thought of a snake hissing. I felt the danger of it, though—danger that broods and plans, and doesn't come out into the open, but waits its chance to strike. Knowing that it was there, sizzling in Haynes' mind, gave me a thrill.

Casually I tossed one of the packs of cigarettes to Nick Mavrocordatus, who had come with me into the pay office. He

gave me a nudge, which meant we'd better scram. When we were out of the building, he held me off from going to any of the few tawdry saloons there under the small, glassed-in airdome of Enterprise City, the one shabby scrap of civilization and excuse for comfort.

"No drinks now, Chet," Nick whispered. "Can't chance it. Got to keep on our toes. In one way I'm glad you talked down to that—whatever you want to call him. But you've made us the worst possible enemy we could have—now."

I shrugged. "What were you gonna tell me before, Nick?" I demanded. "I gathered you had something plenty big in view."

He answered me so abruptly that I didn't quite believe my ears at first. "Pa and Sis and Geedeh and I, have made good, Chet," he said. "We found—not just pickings—but a real fortune in ore, on planetoid 439. So rich is the deposit that we could buy our own smelting and purifying machinery, and hire ships under our own control, to take the refined metals back to Earth!"

"You're kidding, Nick," I said amazedly. "Not a bit of it," he returned.

THEN I was pumping his hand, congratulating him. Really good luck was a phenomenon among the asteroids. That friends of mine, among the thousands of hopeful ones that I didn't know, should grab the jack-pot, seemed almost impossible.

"I suppose you'll all be leaving us soon," I told him. "Going back to Earth, living the lives of millionaires. I'm glad for you all, kid. Your Pa can raise his flowers and grapes, instead of starting up in the truck-garden business again. Your sis, Irene, can study her painting and her music, like she wants to."

Anybody can see the way my thoughts were going just then. When you start out green for the Minor Planets, that's part of what's in your mind, first—get rich, come back to Earth.

Nick sighed heavily as we walked along. That funny smile was on his lips again. He glanced around, and the emerald light of the illuminators was on his young face.

Then he said, "I don't think it's quite

safe to talk here, Chet. Better come to our old space jalopy, the *Corfu*."

The *Corfu* was on the ways outside the dome. We put on space suits to reach it. Inside, the old crate smelled of cooking odors, some of them maybe accumulated over the eighteen months the Mavrocordatuses had been asteroid mining. Old ships are hard to ventilate, with their imperfect air-purifiers.

The instruments in the control room, were battered and patched; and from the living quarters to the rear, issued a duet of snores—one throaty and rattly, Pa Mavrocordatus' beyond doubt; and the other an intermittent hiss, originating unquestionably in the dust-filtering hairs in the larynx of Geedeh, the little Martian scientist, whom Nick had befriended.

"I can't figure you out, Nick," I said. "Rich, and not leaving this hell-hole of space. You're an idiot."

"So are you, Chet," he returned knowingly. "In my place, you wouldn't go either—at least not without regrets. In spite of all hell, there's something big here in space that gets you. You feel like nothing, yourself. But you feel that you're part of something terribly huge and terribly important. You'd be happy on Earth for a week; then you'd begin to smother inside. The Minor Planets have become our home. Chet. It's too late to break the ties."

Slowly it soaked into my mind that Nick was right.

"Not to say anything bad against old Mother Earth, Chet," he continued. "Far from it! That's just what's needed out here—a little touch of our native scene. Growing things. A piece of blue sky, maybe. Enough gravity to make a man believe in solid ground again."

Right then I began to smell Nick's plan, not only what it was, but all the impractical dreamer part of it.

I began to grin, but there was a kind of sadness in me, too. "Sure! Sure, Nick!" I chided. "The idea's as old as the hills! Rejuvenate some asteroid. Bring in soil and water and air from Earth. Install a big gravity-generating unit. Ha! Have you any idea how many ships it would take to bring those thousands and thousands of tons of stuff out here—even to get started?"

I WAS talking loud. My voice was booming through the rusty hull of the *Corfu*, making ringing echoes. So just about as I finished, they were all around me. Pa Mavrocordatus, in pajamas and ragged dressing gown, his handle-bar moustaches bristling. Geedeh, the tiny Martian, draped in a checkered Earthly blanket, his great eyes blinking, and his tiny fingers, with fleshy knobs at their ends instead of nails, twiddling nervously near the center of his barrel-chest. And Irene, too, standing straight and defiant and little, in her blue smock.

Irene hadn't been sleeping. Probably she'd been washing dishes, and straightening up the galley after supper. She still had a dish towel in her hands. Wealth hadn't altered the Mavrocordatus' mode of life, yet. Irene looked like a bold little kewpie, her dark head of tousled, curly hair, not up to my shoulder. She was exquisitely pretty; but now she was somewhat irritated.

She shook a finger up at me, angrily. "You think Nick has a dumb idea, eh, Chet Wallace?" she accused. "That's only because you don't know what you're talking about! We won't have to bring a drop of water, or a molecule of air or soil, out from Earth! You ask Geedeh!"

I turned toward the little Martian. The dark pupil-slits, and the yellow irises of his huge eyes, covered me. "Irene has spoke the truth, Chet," he told me in his slow, labored English. "The Asteroid Belt, the many hundreds of fragments that compose it, are the remains of a planet that exploded. So there is soil on many of the asteroids. Dried out—yes—after most of the water and air disappeared into space, following the catastrophe. But the soil can still be useful. And there is still water, not in free, liquid form, but combined in ancient rock strata; gypsum, especially. It is like on Mars, when the atmosphere began to get too thin for us to breathe, and the water very scarce on the dusty deserts.

I said nothing, wished I had kept silent. "We roasted gypsum in atomic furnaces," Geedah finished, "driving the water out as steam, and reclaiming it for our underground cities. The same can be done here among the Minor Planets. And since water is hydrogen oxide, oxygen can be

obtained from it, too, by electrolysis. Nitrogen and carbon dioxide, necessary to complete the new atmosphere, which will be prevented from leaking into space by the force of the artificial gravity, can be obtained from native nitrates, and other compounds. Only vital parts of the machinery need be brought out from Earth and Mars by rocket. The rest can be made here, from native materials."

Geedeh's voice, as he spoke to me, was a soft, sibilant whisper, like the rustle of red dust in a cold, thin, Martian wind.

"You bet " Pa Mavrocordatus enthused.

"Nick's got a good idea. I'm gonna raise my flowers! I'm gonna raise tomatoes and cabbages and carrots, right here on one of them asteroids!"

It struck me as funny—asteroids—cabbages! Nothing I could think of, could seem quite that far apart. Black, airless vacuum, rough rocks, and raw, spacial sunshine! And things from a truck garden! It didn't match. But then, Pa Mavrocordatus didn't match the asteroids either! He'd had a truck garden once, outside of St. Louis. And yet he was out here in space, and had been for a year and a half!

Well, even if the idea *was* practical, I thought first that they were still just dreaming—kidding themselves that it would be a cinch to accomplish. And not being able to fight through.

Then I glanced back at Nick. That look on his face was there again. A strange mixture of confidence, worry, grimness, and vision. It came to me then that he was no kid at all.

"LET me in on the job?" I asked hopefully.

"Sure!" Nick returned. "We wouldn't be telling you all this, if we didn't want you. That's why we came back to Enterprize—hoping to find you around some place."

So I was in. Part of a wild scheme of progress—more thrilling and inspiring because it seemed so wild. An asteroid made into a tiny, artificial Earth! A boon to void-weary space men! A source of cheap food supplies, as well as a place to rest up. A new stage of colonization—empire building!

And then I thought I heard a sound—a faint clinking outside of the hull of the

Corfu. At once, I was alert—taut. Maybe half of my sudden worry was intuition, or a form of telepathy. When you've been out in deep space, a million miles away from any other living soul, you feel a vast, hollow loneliness, that perhaps is mostly the absence of human telepathy waves from other minds. But when you have people around you once more, your sixth sense seems keener for the period of lack. That was why I was sure of an eavesdropper, sensing his presence. With proper sub-microphonic equipment, a man outside a space ship can hear every word spoken inside.

Nick felt it too. "But we'd better look and see," he whispered. "Norman Haynes keeps spies around. And he may have heard rumors. You can't keep a project like ours secret very long. It's too big."

My pulses jumped with fear, as I piled into my space suit. But when Nick and I got through the airlock together, there was nobody in sight. Only some footprints in the faint rocket dust of the ways, covering our own footprints, where we'd passed before, coming to the *Corfu*. Our flashlights showed them plainly.

"Having a rejuvenated asteroid in these parts, producing fresh food and so forth, would take a lot of trade away from the Haynes Shipping Company, wouldn't it?" I said when we were back in the cabin once more. "Norman Haynes wouldn't be practically boss of the Minor Planets anymore, would he? He wouldn't like that. He'll fight us."

"We need you, Chet," Irene said, her eyes appealing. That was enough for me.

"We'd better blast off right away," Nick added. "We're going to asteroid 487, Chet. It's new name is Paradise. It's the one we've picked."

II

ASTEROID 487 was the usual thing. A torn, jagged, airless fragment. It was no paradise yet, unless it was a paradise of devils. Nick had a thousand men hired—space roustabouts, and a lot of mechanics and technicians, mostly fresh from Earth. Sure, it's hard handling a bunch like that, but there was nothing in this difficulty that we didn't know was part of the job. Some of our outfit gave us horse-

laughs, but they worked. The pay was good.

The ships came through with the packed loads of machinery. Atomic forges blazed, purifying native meteoric iron to complete the vast gravity-generating machine, sunk in a shaft at the center of the planetoid, ten miles down. Geedeh directed most of the work. Nick and I saw that orders were carried out, swearing, sweating, and making speeches intended to inspire.

And then the trouble started.

A rocket, bringing in food, and money to pay our crews, blew up in space, just as it was coming close. The light of the blast was blinding and awesome, making even the bright stars seem to vanish for a moment. Atomic rocket fuel going up. Gobs of molten metal dripped groundward, like real meteors heated in an atmosphere which still didn't exist.

It could have been an accident. You can't always control titanic atomic power, and space ships fly to pieces quite frequently. But then I had a suspicion that maybe this wasn't an accident.

Nick and I were in the open plain to see it happen. He'd just come from the airtight barracks we'd built. His face didn't change much behind the quartz crystal of his oxygen helmet—it only sobered a trifle. While the fiery wreckage of the rocket was still falling in shreds and fragments, he spoke, his voice clicking in my receptor phones:

"Yeah, Chet. . . . And there's trouble on asteroid 439, too, where our mines are located. I just got the radio message, back at the office. Sabotage, and some men killed. It seems that some of the workmen are trying to break things up for us. Harley's in charge. I think he can handle matters—for a while."

"I hope so," I answered fervently. "If the work only turns out right at this end. With that ship smashed, we'll be on short rations for a week. And we've lost some important machinery. The pay money's insured, but the men won't like the delay."

I didn't expect much trouble from the crew—yet. It was Irene that really helped the most—mastered the situation. She'd taken over the management of the kitchens since the start of the work.

But now she had an additional job. She talked to that rough crew of ours. "We're

going to win, boys!" she told them. "We know what we've got to do: Our task is for the good of every one of us—and for many people yet to come!"

Simple, straightforward, inspiring talk. Funny what men will do for a pretty girl—against hell itself. But that wasn't all of it. The paintings of hers, that she'd hung in our recreation room, showed what asteroid 487 *could* be, when we were finished with it.

Space men are the toughest kind of adventurers that ever lived. But adventurers are always optimists, sentimentalists, romanticists, no matter how hard the exterior. And space men, by the very nature of the appalling region to which they belong, believe in miracles.

THEY cheered the thought—most of those tough men. I cheered, too. But the miracle hadn't happened yet, and in the back of my mind, there was always the fear that it wouldn't happen. Those crags were still bleak and star-washed. Deader than any tomb! It wasn't an impossible wonder—technically—to change all this. But perhaps it was impossible, anyway—because of Norman Haynes! He was the only person who had the power and the reason to stop all that we were attempting. The sabotage and killings must be incited by him—certain members of our crews must be in his hire. Quite probably the rocket that had blown up had been secretly mined with explosive, under his orders, too.

But there is nothing harder to fight than those subtle methods. We had no proof, and no easy means of getting it. We could only go on with our task. Geedeh and the rest of us worked hopefully. One segment of asteroid 487, had been part of the surface of that old world that had exploded. From here we spread the dry soil over the planetoid's jagged terrain, drawing it in atom trucks. More soil was brought in from other asteroids. The great rock-roasting furnaces were put up. Gypsum was heated in them, releasing its water in great clouds of steam, which the artificial gravity kept from drifting off into space. Some of the water, under electrolysis, yielded oxygen. Nitrogen came from nitrates.

Our gravity machine needed readjustments now and then. To a large extent,

the thousands of parts that composed it were electrical. Great coils converted magnetic force into gravitation.

One ship reached us all right, bringing seeds and food. Another didn't. It blew up in space, the second to go. Then somebody tried to get Geedeh, the Martian, with a heat ray. Another food ship failed to arrive.

Then Norman Haynes came to visit us. He landed before he had a chance to refuse to receive him. He had a body-guard of a dozen men. He was our enemy, but we couldn't prove it. He seemed to have forgotten the little brush between himself and me, at his office.

"Splendid layout you've got, Wallace and Mavrocordatus!" he said to Nick and me, pronouncing Nick's name perfectly. He sounded very much like his usual self. "Of course there's bound to be difficulties. Trouble with crews, and so on. It's hard to get people to believe in a project as fantastic as this. I didn't quite believe in it, either, at first. But the facts are proved, now that the groundwork is laid. You'll need help, fellows. I can give it to you."

He was smiling, but under the smile I could see a snaky smirk, which probably he didn't know showed. I felt fury rising inside me. He was trying to get control of our project, now that he saw for sure that it could amount to something. Competition he feared, but if he had control he could enforce his high prices, keep his empire, and expand his wealth by millions of dollars. His dirty work must have been partly an attempt to force the issue.

"Thanks," Nick told him quietly. "But we prefer to do everything alone."

Our visitor shrugged, standing there at the door of his space boat. "Okay," he breezed. "Get in touch with me, if you feel you need me!"

Some hours later, a radiogram came through from Earth. "*Congratulations!*" it read. "*Stick to your guns! I like people with imagination. Maybe I'll be back in harness soon myself.*—Art Haynes."

HE'S probably just being sarcastic," I said bitterly.

"Old devil!" Pa Mavrocordatus growled.

Two men were killed just thirty minutes after the message was received. A little thin-faced fellow named Sparr did it. But

he got away in a space boat before we could catch him. A paid killer and trouble maker.

The incident put our crew more on edge than before. A half dozen of the newcomers—mechanics from Earth—quit abruptly. Our food was almost gone. We got another shipload in, but the growing unrest didn't abate, though we kept on for another month. There was similar trouble on 439, where the Mavrocordatus money came from. But maybe we'd make the grade, anyway.

We had a pretty dense atmosphere already, on Paradise Asteroid. The black sky had turned blue now. The ground was moist with water. Earthly buildings were going up. Pa Mavrocordatus had had seeds and small trees and things planted. It was that deceptive moment of success, before the real blow came.

After sunset one night, I heard shots. I raced out of the barracks, Geedeh, Irene, and Pa Mavrocordatus following me. We all carried blast tubes.

We found Nick in a gorge, his body half burned through, just above his right hip. But he was still alive. He had a blast tube in one hand. Two men lay on the rocks and earth in front of him, dead. Beside them, glinting in our flashlight beams, was an aluminum cylinder.

"It's a bacteria culture container, Chet," Nick whispered. "They had me caught, and they bragged a little before I did some fast moving, and got one of their blast tubes. Venutian Black-Rot germs. They were going to dump them in the drinking water supply. They mentioned—Haynes. . . ."

Nick couldn't say much more than that. But he'd saved our lives. He died there in my arms, a hero to progress, a little breeze in the new atmosphere he'd helped to create rumpling his curly hair. He'd died for his dream of beauty and betterment.

Poor little Irene couldn't even cry. Her face was white, and she was stricken mute. Her pa was shaken by great sobs, and he babbled threats. I told him to shut up. Geedeh cursed in his own language, his voice a soft, deadly hiss, his little fists clenching and unclenching.

"Too bad Nick had to kill these men!" I growled. "We could have made 'em talk.

We'd have evidence. The law would take care of Norman Haynes!"

"But we ain't got nothing!" Pa Mavrocordatus groaned. "Nothing!"

Geedeh's face was twisted into a Martian snarl of hate. Irene stared, as though she were somewhere far away. I tried putting my arm around her, to bring her back to us. It was a minute before she seemed to realize I was there.

"Irene," I said. "I love you. We all love you. Buck up, kid. We can't quit now—ever! We'd be letting Nick down."

She just nodded. She couldn't talk.

A COUPLE of hours later I was meeting our workers in our office. Most of them tried to be decent about it. "We'd like to stick, Wallace. But how can we? Nothing to eat. . . ." That was what most of them said, in one way or another.

And how could I answer them?

Some were not so regretful, of course. Some were downright ugly. A little crazy with space perhaps, or else hopped up with propaganda that secret agents in Haynes' hire had been spreading among them.

"Why should we work for you anyway?" they snarled. "Even for good money, most of which we haven't collected? You're probably like what we're used to. Just fixing up another place here, to clip us in the end, charging us prices sky high. Your 'Paradise' is just a little fancier, that's all."

So they turned away, and the exodus began. The freight ships blasted off, one by one, with loads of men. We couldn't stop them. And soon the silence closed in. We were left alone to bury Nick. The small sun was bright on the rough pinnacles, and their naked grey stone was bluely murky in the new air. There was a humid warmth of summer around us.

Just then, I didn't even feel exactly angry, in the blackness of failure, Norman Haynes had won, so far. What would be his next step in completing our final defeat?

I spent some time in the office, going over records. Presently Pa Mavrocordatus came rushing from the barracks. His whole fat body sagged, as he paused before me. His face was like paste. He didn't seem quite alive.

"Irene," he croaked. "She's gone . . . too. . . ."

I ran with him to her quarters. There was some disorder. A picture of her mother was tipped over on a little metal dressing table. A rug was rumpled, and there was some clothing scattered on the floor. That was all.

Geedeh had entered her quarters, too. "Kidnapped," he hissed.

What Haynes meant to accomplish by having his agents carry off Irene, I couldn't imagine. The hate I felt blurred all but the thought of getting her back to safety. The urge was like a dagger-point, sharp and clear in the chaos of memories. I knew how much she meant to me now.

"I need a rocket," I said quietly. "The fastest we've got. I want to radio the Space Patrol, too."

"There are no ships left here," Geedeh returned. "The men took them all, except a little flier, which they meant us to have. But somebody has smashed it. Our big radio transmitter is smashed, also."

A minute later I was clawing in the wreckage of tubes and wires, there in the radio room. The apparatus was completely beyond repair. For the time being we were helpless, stranded on our asteroid. For a moment I felt little shouts of madness shrieking in my brain. But Geedeh's stabbing glance warned me that this was not the way. I fought back, out of that flash of mania.

"We'd better break out all of our weapons, Geedeh," I said. "Haynes has gone too deep to back out now. He's in danger of the Patrol if we talk, so he'll have to strike at us soon."

Thus we prepared ourselves as well as we could, for attack. Geedeh, Pa Mavrocordatus, and I. We equipped ourselves with our best armament—atomic rifles. Pa Mavrocordatus had gotten over most of his confusion. He was still sick with grief, but necessity seemed to have steadied him. He clutched his rifle grimly as we took up positions behind rock masses at the edge of the landing field.

III

WE waited silently. The asteroid turned on its axis. The brief night came. Then we saw the rockets approaching—flaming in on shreds of blue-white rocket fire. As the two ships slowed for a

landing, the three of us discharged a volley.

Our atomic bullets burst on impact, dazzling in the dark. The concussion was terrific.

"Got one!" I heard Pa Mavrocordatus shout after a moment, his voice thin through the ringing in my ears. My dazzled eyes saw one ship lying on its side on the landing field, its meteor armor unpunctured by our small missiles, but with its landing rockets damaged. The other ship had grounded itself perfectly.

We were ready to fire again, when the paralytic waves swept over us. I saw Geedeh half rise, doubling backward in a rigid spasm, his rifle flying wide.

Then I knew no more, until I heard Norman Haynes speaking to us. We were bound firmly, and it was daylight again, and our captor and his score of henchmen were smirking.

"I'm just trying to figure out how to make your deaths seem as accidental as possible," Haynes said, looking at me. "A couple of men of mine seem to have bungled a little business of bacteria. Maybe they blabbed before you fellows killed them. Now, of course, I can't take any chances. Too bad your reconditioned asteroid has to appear a failure for a while. But I can't let my taking over seem too obvious. Have to wait a while. I may be able to start up something here later, when people sort of forget."

"What have you done with Irene?" I stormed blackly.

Haynes' look was quizzical. "Why ask me?" he answered. "She probably ran off with one of your roustabouts. Or else they decided that she'd be nice company to have around, and made her go along."

He laughed cynically. Maybe he was telling the truth about not knowing where Irene was. But if this was true, it didn't make me feel much better. If some of his gang, who'd been working with us, had kidnapped her, there was no telling how badly she'd fare.

My fears showed on my face, and Norman Haynes seemed to enjoy them, though he was nervous, dangerously so. It was getting daylight again, now. He kept glancing at the sky, twiddling his soft hands. He didn't like physical danger.

"Your gravity generator seems to be the answer to my prayers, Wallace," he in-

formed me. "At full force it'll develop at least fifty Earth gravities, before breaking down and melting itself. We've inspected it. Power like that'll destroy all of you. It will look like an accident—a breakdown of the machinery."

Though Pa Mavrocordatus kept cursing Haynes continuously, and Geedeh kept calling him names that no Earthman could have translated into our less vitriolic English, our captor paid them no attention. He kept directing his threats at me. That was how I knew he was still thinking of the time in his office at Enterprize, when I'd called him by his true colors. He still held that grudge, and he meant to pay me back with fifty gravities. Which means that every pound of Earth-weight would be increased to fifty pounds! In a grip like that a man as big as me would weigh a good four tons!

That meant a heart stopped by the load of the blood it tried to pump, and tissues crushed by their own weight! Like being on the surface of some dead star of medium dimensions, where gravity is terrific!

AT Haynes' order, six of his twenty henchmen picked up Geedeh and Pa and me. The whole bunch was an ugly looking lot, the scum of the space ports. Some of these men were commanded to stay on the surface of the planetoid, while we were carried to the elevator shed. In the cage we descended at dizzying speed to that vault at the center of 487 where the gravity machinery was housed in its crystal shell. At that depth, under the load of the column of air above, the atmospheric pressure was very high. One could not breathe comfortably in that stuffy medium.

"Courage!" Geedah gasped to Pa Mavrocordatus and me, while his great eyes kept roving around, looking for some chance that wasn't there.

Haynes began to examine the machinery. He was smirking again. "Simple to do!" he said to his companions. Set the robot control for gradually increasing power, so that we'll have time to get away. Break the manual controls, so that no readjustments can be made. You can cut our friends loose now, Zinder, so there won't be any ropes to show this was a put-up job. But keep your blasters on these men—all of you!"

This was the end, all right. I was sure of it. I'd die without even knowing what had happened to Irene. Irene, whom I knew now that I loved. . . .

We'd been freed of our bonds when the surface phone rang. The lookout party, whom Haynes had left above, was calling. Our captor snapped on the switch of the speaker. A voice boomed in that busy cavern of metal giants, green light, and glinting crystal:

"Listen, Chief! There's a bunch of specks to the right of the sun. They're getting bigger fast. Must be a flock of space ships. Couldn't be any of yours. What'll we do?"

I saw Haynes' weak features go sallow. Briefly my spirits rose. I couldn't imagine whom those ships could belong to. But they must be rescuers of some kind. They were coming to stop Norman Haynes' madness.

But Haynes was clever, as he quickly proved. "Friends of Wallace here, I suppose. Maybe even Space Patrol boats," he said over his phone to the lookout party. "You'll all have to take a discomfort for a while. We'll use gravity on them, too! They'll never land successfully."

Pa Mavrocordatus looked at me and Geedeh. "What's he mean—use gravity?"

Geedeh was a bit quicker than I in giving the obvious answer. "Just as with us," he said. "Increase the output of the gravity generator here to a certain degree. From space, the increase will be practically unnoticeable. The rockets will try to land—but without taking into consideration the multiplied attractive force, they will crash!"

"Many birds with one stone!" Haynes chuckled gleefully. "You will have a short reprieve, friends, while I take care of these intruders, whoever they are. I can't use too great a gravity on them at first. It might warn them, if they notice that their ships are accelerating too rapidly. They might as well be part of my 'accident', even if they do happen to be police. The Space Patrol has accidents now and then, just like anybody else!"

Haynes started to work the manual controls of the generator. The area in which he and his several aides stood, was shielded against the greater attraction, having been thus arranged by us for test-

ing purposes. The shrill hum of the machines grew louder.

I felt the weight of my prone body increase suffocatingly. The heat increased too, as the great coils, gleaming in the glow of illuminators, gradually absorbed more power. And I knew that, out in space, those slender fingers of force were reaching and strengthening, invisible and treacherous. Our unknown friends were doomed.

Not only were they doomed, but our whole idea was destined to failure. The dream that Nick had died for. The vast progress that it meant. Worlds out here—worlds with largely a self-sufficient production—real colonization. Fair play. Norman Haynes would resist all that, because progress would weaken his power here. He was master of the asteroids, because he was master of their imports and exports. And unless he could control the rejuvenated asteroids himself, they would never be. With him directing, they would not represent a real improvement—only another means of robbing from the colonists. And colonists weren't rich.

I could see those same thoughts, that gouged savagely into my own brain, burning in Geedeh's cat eyes, where he sprawled near me. Being a Martian, born to a lesser gravity than the terrestrial, he was suffering more than I—physically. But perhaps my mental torture was worse. Geedeh was Irene's friend, but I loved her. She was gone—lost somewhere—maybe dead. That, for me, was the worst—much worse than that crushing weight.

I couldn't let things remain the way they were! My seething fury and need lashed me on, even in my helplessness. God—what could I do? I tried to figure something out. Could I break the gravity machinery some way? Impossible, now, certainly!

I tried to remember my high school physics. Principles that might be used to give warning signals, and so forth. And just what that awful gravity would do to things.

Close to me was the base of the domelike crystal shell that covered the gravity generator. It wasn't a vital part, certainly, just stout quartz. But it was the only thing I could reach. As I lay there on the floor, I drew my foot back, doubling my knee.

I stamped down against the quartz with all my strength. The first blow cracked it. The second drove my metal-shod boot-heel through with a crashing sound. A small hole, eighteen inches long, was made in the barrier. The sounds of the great machinery went on as before. The gravity kept slowly increasing. Geedeh, suffering more, now, looked at me puzzledly. Pa Mavrocordatus stared anxiously. And Norman Haynes at the surface phone laughed unpleasantly.

"Cracking up, eh, Wallace?" he sneered. "I know who your would-be helpers on those space ships are, now. I suppose I should be surprised at their identities. They're calling to you. Want to listen? My men above have looked this surface phone to our ship radio."

He turned up the volume of the reproducer.

Irene's voice was the first in the speaker. "Chet!" she was urging. "Chet Wallace! Pa! Geedeh! Do you hear me? I left 487 of my own free will. I couldn't waste time, going to the Space Patrol for help—they'd want proof, and that would take a while to present. So—there was only one person and I thought you'd mistrust him. . . . Why don't you answer? Or have you left 487 too? I'm turning the mike over to somebody else, now. I found him on Enterprize, just come from Earth, Mr. Arthur Haynes. . . ."

IV

I GASPED, listening to Irene. I didn't know what surprised and confused me most—her being alive and safe, or what she'd done about old Art Haynes. Could I trust old Art? I had no way of telling. Had Irene told him about his nephew, or had she kept silent? Did he know he was opposed to Norman Haynes, or did he think it was somebody else who had sabotaged the project? Where would his loyalties be, if he found out? It was a ticklish situation.

As soon as Irene's ragged, excited breathing died away in the speaker, Norman Haynes took it upon himself to clarify his own stand, and my uncertainties. He looked at Geedeh and Pa and me, tense and suffering in the grip of the gravity, and tortured with doubt.

"Uncle Art is an old fool," he said. "So he thinks he'll come back to the asteroids, and replace me in the business, does he? Well, he should have died long ago, and now is as good a time as any! He might as well be part of the accident, too, along with those space bums of yours. Nobody'll ever know!"

It was tragic that old Art couldn't have heard that. But his nephew wasn't broadcasting. He was just listening quietly. And now his uncle's voice was coming through:

"We're blasting in to land, Wallace, if you're listening. There won't be any more trouble, now. I'll see to that! We'll find out who's back of this sabotage. We'll put an end to it!"

For me it was bitter, black irony—old Art proving himself our friend, now! He didn't know his enemy. He was nearly ninety—a grim old fighter, with real vision. Irene too, who meant everything to me. She didn't know that with the intensified gravity those incoming ships would be smashed and blazing!

My mind was growing a bit dim in the strangling pressure of the artificial gravitation. Sweat was streaming from me in the smothering heat that added to the oppressiveness of the heavy air. Pa Mavrocordatus was groaning the name of his daughter. Geedeh's great eyes were fixed on me in helpless suffering.

Through the shrill sounds of the engines I listened for more words from Irene and old Art. But none came. They must know their doom by now. They must be fighting savagely and hopelessly to get away. Still some distance from 487, they were already caught, deep in the web of invisible force.

After some moments, I heard a distant crash, a roll of sound. What was it? A huge rocket, hitting the jagged crags above, at meteoric speed? Crumpling, destroying itself and those inside it? I thought my heart would burst with the added weight of my anxiety.

The first crash was only the beginning. Others followed in quick succession—inexorably. And there was a faint, far-off roar, coming down from ten miles above.

And that roar was the roar of titanic rain. Of floods of water coming down this shaft, where the gravity machine was! All

the countless tons of water that we'd baked from ancient rocks, and which had been mostly suspended as vapor in our synthetic atmosphere, was condensing now, coming down in torrents!

NORMAN HAYNES kept grinning satanically, while he and his aides attended to the gravity machine. Triumph showed in his eyes. But presently he began to look puzzled, as that souging roar that accompanied the crashing din, increased. It was a little early for the space ships to be smashing up, anyway.

I could feel a grim smile coming over my lips, against my will. Had my guesses and hopes, which had seemed so unsubstantial, been correct? Norman Haynes was glancing doubtfully at the reproducer. I could see that he was wondering why his surface watchers didn't communicate any more—and tell him what was happening up there on the crust of 487.

I knew the answers, now! Geedeh did, too. The excitement of knowledge was in his withered, pain-wracked face. Those distant crashes were not what I'd feared they might be, but part of what I'd hoped for. They were gigantic thunder-claps—the noise of terrific lightning bolts! Norman Haynes had made a simple oversight in his plan to destroy those incoming space craft. There was a fearsome electrical storm going on above—one of inconceivable proportions—utterly beyond the Earthly! Doubtless all of Norman Haynes' surface watchers, up above, had been killed by that sudden deluge of electricity! The multiplied gravitation up there, had pinned them down, so that they could neither escape, nor warn their chief!

Before Norman Haynes understood what was happening, foam-flecked muddy water was at the door of the machinery room, rushing and gurgling past the threshold! He and his helpers stared at it stupidly, and I laughed at them.

"You didn't realize it, did you, Haynes?" I grunted. "You didn't realize that increased gravity would increase the weight of the atmosphere, as well as of everything else! And increased weight of the air, means increased atmospheric pressure, too, pushing molecules together, creating greater density. And what happens? Go back to your high school physics, Haynes!

It's like when you store air in the tank of a compressor pump. The moisture in it liquifies. And in the case of an atmosphere as big as 487 has now, static electricity would be suddenly and violently condensed, besides."

Norman Haynes stared at me, stunned with consternation. But his recovery was fairly prompt. His sudden sneer had a rattish desperation. "Hell," he said. "Just a thunder storm. A lot of rain. What of it? The gravity machine still works. The ships will still be destroyed."

I knew that that was true—unless what I'd planned happened. Those rockets, manned by our old construction crew, and Irene, and old Art Haynes, had been too close to asteroid 487 for the last couple of minutes, to effect an escape, even if the sudden dark clouds had warned them that something dangerous was afoot.

"Watch this—Haynes," Geedeh panted, and it was hard for the acting head of the Haynes Shipping Company to guess what the little Martian meant, at first.

UNDER the pull of that terrific gravity, the water was coming into that room like an avalanche. Geedeh and Pa and I were floundering in it feebly, held to the floor by that awful weight. I was sure we'd drown. But as we coughed and sputtered, the flood found its way through the hole I'd kicked, low down in the side of the crystal dome that covered that gigantic machinery. There was a flash of electrical flame, as the water interfered with the functioning of the apparatus.

It was pandemonium, then. Every man for himself. Geedeh, the scientist, and I, who, under the force of grim need, had somehow contrived to plan this finale, had the advantage of knowledge. We'd figured out a little of what to do.

The gravity winked off suddenly—reaching the low of practically nothing, here at the center of this tiny world, whose normal attraction, even at the surface, was very small. We struggled to our feet, in a muddy swirl that was now a yard in depth. But before we could take advantage of our sudden lightness, and leap clear, the gravity machines gave a last gasp of power, and we were pulled down again, smothering. Then, with a grating roar, the apparatus stopped. The bedlam ceased, ex-

cept for a low whine of expanding atmosphere, and screams from Haynes and his men.

Presently, I felt all hell stabbing through me. My ears rang as with the after effects of some colossal explosion. My whole body ached. I clutched at Geedeh, who seemed on the point of collapse. Pa Mavrocordatus managed to help me. . . .

But strained by gravity vastly stronger than that of Mars, and now facing a circumstance even more dangerous, tough little Geedeh still had his wits, fortunately for us all. He pointed to an airtight crystal cage at one edge of the chamber. The cage was necessary in routine testing of the machinery here, which called for variations in the output of the gravity generators, and consequent great variations in air pressure.

"Inside the cage—all of us!" Geedeh squeaked. "Quickly! Bends! . . ."

Do you know what the air pressure is, at the bottom of a ten-mile shaft, even at normal Earth gravity? Yeah, something pretty high! Then you can imagine what it had just been like, here, at six or seven gravities! But when the generators had quit entirely, there had been that sudden loss of weight in the air, sudden expansion, thinning, loss of pressure!

The three of us got inside the cage, and sealed the door. I spun valves. There was a hiss of entering atmosphere, and the pressure rose again, far above the norm of sea-level, on Earth. I felt better at once, but I knew it had been a close call.

We looked out at Norman Haynes and his henchmen. They weren't drowning, now. Tottering, they stood with their heads well above the flood. It was something else that was killing them. Not suffocation, either. Their faces were bloated and congested in the glow of illuminators. Their bodies seemed to swell.

Norman Haynes raised his blast tube, as did several of the others, trying to fire at the crystal shelter where we had taken refuge. Norman Haynes must have known his failure, then. Why had it happened. How we had won. It may be that he even realized some justice in his hideous punishment. He had tried to obstruct progress and fair play.

The blast tube dropped from his fingers. He opened his mouth to shriek in his

agony. But dark blood gushed forth, and, with his henchmen, he toppled back into the water.

"BENDS!" Geedeh said again. "Haynes had a worse case of bends than any deep-sea diver ever experienced."

The flood had almost stopped, now, outside the cage. We waited. Vengeance was complete. And it wasn't quite as satisfying as I might once have thought.

Presently they were with us. Irene. And old Art—proving that the Haynes name was still great, even though one who bore it had soiled it some. We emerged from our sealed cage, after the pressure around us was gradually lowered to normal.

"I didn't think it was Norman who was guilty," old Art breathed sadly when he spoke to us. "I knew he was high-handed, but I didn't realize it was as bad as it was. I guess Norman got what he deserved," he finished, and there were tears in his heavy voice.

We went to the surface in the elevator. We needed space suits again, up there, with the air as expanded as it was. A lot of the atmosphere was leaking away from 487, being held down only by the tiny natural gravity. But there was nothing that couldn't be repaired and replaced.

"We must have pumps rigged to draw the water out of the vault, so that we can dry and repair the gravity machinery, and start it again," Geedeh stated.

We started again, almost as we had done at the first, for quite a bit of the air and water had been whisked into space. We lived in space-suits for days, rebuilding and repairing the damaged machinery. Then with the aid of Art Haynes, and with extended credit now that our plans were made fully known and approved, we imported machinery to pump the water from the vault.

We hired specialists to come in, each of them with a trained crew of men to do the work that our old crews lacked the technical skill to do. Slowly, our planet of hope grew again, and there were bulletins sent through the asteroid belt that workers were wanted again on Paradise Asteroid.

The specialists left, replaced by the crews that had worked on the asteroid before. With unlimited credit, our great freighting

ships piled materials in regular formation, and the returning crews set their ships down on the landing fields, the men pouring eagerly forth, ready to set up the buildings that would be the nucleus of another Earth in space.

With our old crews returned, it took about a hundred hours to accomplish this. Asteroid 487 was almost the same as before the final trouble with Norman Haynes, now, except that the air was a little thinner. But that could be quickly taken care of. Pa Mavrocordatus was working with his vineyards and trees, and his tomato and cabbage patches, again. The big trouble was all finished, now. The dream was coming true. A little Earth, fresh and green, for tired miners of the Path of Minor Planets. Space madness could never be so common now. And cheap, fresh products would be theirs.

V

IRENE and I walked in the warm night. The crews were whooping it up in the lighted barracks. Somebody was playing a harmonica. The stars were brilliant, and there were a thousand things to think of. How we'd all struggled. How Nick Mavrocordatus, had dreamed and worked and died. How once the asteroids had been a planet, with almost human inhabitants, dreaming, planning, struggling, too. Their rock carvings were everywhere.

"It's the beginning, Chet," Irene whispered. "Asteroid 487 is the first. But there'll be others—other small, beautiful, living planets. There's a lot of work to be done. And when it's all finished that will be almost unfortunate—too tame."

I knew what she meant. She was pioneer stuff, just as all of us were. The greatness of life was in its battles. On and on, to vaster and vaster heights. That was what had driven us into the interplanetary void in the first place.

I kissed her. "Don't worry, Honey," I said. "There's no end to it. No point of final stagnation. It goes on and on. There'll always be a frontier—something bigger to reach and conquer. . . ."

And we looked up in awe toward the infinite stars.

THE THOUGHT-MEN OF MERCURY

By R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

Hall and Upjohn had to escape from that "No-man's-land" on Mercury. But to form a plan, they had to think—and their captors could read minds.

Illustrated by Lynch

IT was neither night nor day, but a sort of nether world of twilight. The huge fern-like plants, flashing phosphorescence under the green corona light, seemed to close in after Cappy Upjohn and Terry Hall like prison bars in the windows of a dungeon.

Cappy, who was leading the way, paused and waited for Terry. As the huge, leonine man turned, his lips curled into a taunting smile.

Terry's eyes moved from side to side, watching the weird shadows, dodging the sweep of the giant ferns as they moved in the wind.

"Scared!" Cappy ridiculed.

"I can't help it!" the younger man said. "This place gives me the creeps."

Cappy's great laugh echoed above the howl of the winds. "This is Mercury. Half day, half night everlastingly. Right here is the battleground of roasting heat and perpetual cold. A twenty-mile strip of habitable land between two kinds of hell. What the devil did you expect, Tenderfoot?"

Cappy grunted in disgust, turned and picked his way through the ferns. Terry, his jaw set grimly, followed. Cappy had been through all this before. Twice he'd landed on Venus, and he'd been with the only previous expedition to Mercury. But Terry knew that fear was a human emotion, and that there were things even Cappy was afraid of.

The wind died a moment. Between an opening in the ferns Terry caught a glimpse of a ghostly face, more simian than an ape's, less human than a man's. At the same time he felt something that was like a breeze through his brain. A painless stab of thought.

"Cappy—look!" Terry pointed at the face peering through the opening in the ferns, and his hand clawed at the rifle he had slung over his shoulder. In all respects it was like an old-fashioned gun, but it fired a deadly bullet that was capable of complete annihilation of whatever it hit. A single bullet from a flouro-beam gun was powerful enough to wipe out a steel ball ten feet in diameter.

But Terry's hands slipped away from his gun. He recognized his action as more than fear. It was panic.

Cappy had been too surprised at the sight of the grinning face to notice Terry's action. Now the youth had control of himself.

"Great guns! This is something new, lad! A living creature on Mercury!"

"I tried to tell you, Cappy!" Terry said. "I've seen 'em. I've felt 'em for the past hour!"

"Felt 'em? Did they touch you?"

"It's something I can't describe. It's like poking a finger into our brains. It doesn't hurt, but it feels uncomfortable. It's like being watched by someone you can't see."

Cappy's boldness seemed to tarnish a little. A suggestion of a shudder seemed to pass over the man. He straightened and shook it off.

"Pooh! Imagination, Terry!"

Cappy took a step toward the creature. The eyes seemed to flash. Perhaps it was a reflection from the corona streamers stretching above the horizon to the west. Cappy halted as the creature seemed to shrink away.

"Hold on!" Cappy called. "Don't go away! We've got to see that creature, Terry. Get it back! Can you stop it!"



There was no mistaking that the animal was intelligent. Perhaps it felt the same emotions that raced through Terry's body.

"Let me try," Terry said. His heart was pounding, but science had to know if intelligent life existed in Mercury's twilight zone.

Terry stripped the gun from his shoulders and laid it on the ground. He pushed passed Cappy and walked toward the creature. Terry's hands were extended, palms outward.

The creature hesitated. Its eyes flashed again and once more Terry felt something cold in his skull.

The ferns parted and the creature stepped out into view.

IT had two stubby legs, two long arms. Its head was pear-shaped and hairless, and its body was an ovoid ball, bloated and ugly. But its eyes were almost human except that they seemed to flash fire.

Terry halted, facing the creature.

"Terryhall of the earth!" The creature's voice echoed through the ferns.

"You—you speak English!" The words that fell from Terry's lips mirrored his surprise. In his mind flashed a name for this creature. Something like *Zombie*, the living dead.

"Not *Zombie*. Name is Chomby. I am not dead, not even living dead."

"You read my mind! That's what I've felt for the past hour. You were studying my thoughts, and you learned my language by reading my mind!"

Chomby's rubbery lips tried to imitate a grin, but it achieved only a hideous travesty.

Chomby's hand rubbed over the leathery rags he wore for clothing and reached toward the earthman. The gesture was unmistakable. Chomby wanted to shake hands. The Mercurian had been thorough in his probe of Terry's brain. His actions were more human than Terry's under the circumstances, for Terry was afraid.

"Nothing to fear from Chomby," spoke the Mercurian.

Terry took the hand. It was leathery and cold.

"I am glad to meet you," Terry said. He forced the words from his lips. "We

came to mercury on a peaceful mission."

"You're afraid, Terryhall," Chomby replied. "I do not intend to kill you. Nor will I hurt Cappyupjohn."

Cappy brushed forward and shook hands with Chomby. He concealed a wince as he touched the creature's corpse-like flesh.

Then he unstrapped the caseknife he wore at his side and handed it to Chomby. "A gift of friendship," he said.

Chomby reached awkwardly toward the knife. As he took it, the knife fell to the ground. Chomby leaned over and fumbled. He could hardly grasp the knife. Terry noted now what had been so repulsive about Chomby's handshake. The Mercurian had no thumb.

Instead of the five-fingered hand of a human being, there were only three flabby fingers on the end of a round, gristly hand.

Terry stooped and picked up the knife. He handed it to the Mercurian who seized it in both hands and clutched it to his body.

"You want food and drink?" Chomby asked. "Terryhall and Cappyupjohn follow me to my village. Sorry I have no gift of friendship otherwise. My people are unskilled in handicraft. We can hardly make our own clothes."

Chomby led the earthmen eastward. The shadows deepened and the sky grew dark. The stars appeared; among them the brilliant blue planet that was Earth.

Again Chomby read Terry's thoughts.

"You come from that one?" he asked, pointing. "You are from the sky?"

Terry answered, but Chomby seemed to read the thoughts that Terry flashed through his mind.

"Spaceship. Machines. Rockets." The Mercurian rolled the words in his mouth. "You come from a great race, Terryhall and Cappyupjohn. My people want to learn skill with our hands, to be like you."

"It would be nice if we could read your minds," Cappy said, tossing a glance toward Terry.

"You are suspicious men," Chomby said. "I read your mind and I know you do not trust me. You fear a trap. That is why you carry your guns. But there is nothing to fear from Chomby's

people. You will think them very primitive."

The cold winds lashed at the earthmen and nipped through the heavy clothing they wore. Terry and Cappy lowered a plastic windshield from their caps to protect their faces from frostbite.

Vegetation grew more scarce and at last they walked across a rocky plain toward a row of towering basalt cliffs. The feeble light that came from the outer fringe of the corona revealed a row of caves at the base of the cliffs and from these emerged a hundred or so ill-fashioned beings resembling Chomby.

The Mercurian gave no cry, nor warning of his approach. He apparently had notified his people by telepathy, for they rushed silently to meet him. Chomby lapsed into silence, turning from one of his kinsfolk to another, answering questions without speaking.

Cappy stared at the Mercurians. His leonine figure marched through the ill-shaped creatures confidently and unafraid. Doubts crept into Terry's mind. There were too many Mercurians. Despite the powerful weapons strapped to the earthmen's backs, they could not hope to escape imprisonment, if these savages sought to hold them.

Chomby led the men to a cave in the center of the village. He turned to Terry.

"My people think you are queer, Terryhall," Chomby said. "But it is evident to them that you think the same about us. But we are all one people. Terryhall and Cappyupjohn are not the same. Terryhall is afraid, while Cappyupjohn is a man of rock. Are you not of the same race?"

"More or less," Cappy said, deridingly. "Terry doesn't understand you and he fears what he doesn't understand. I've learned to control fear, so I am not afraid."

"You trust us?" Chomby seemed surprised.

"No," Cappy replied. "I don't trust anything, but I'm not afraid of you."

"What if we should intend to keep you here?" Chomby asked. "Terry sees himself as a prisoner, a slave. He fears he will never return to the earth."

"I still have my gun," Cappy said.

"There are many of us," Chomby said,

his lips gaping again in that imitation grin. "We could overpower you and kill you."

"I'd take some of you with me," Cappy replied, defiantly. "I'd go out in a blaze of glory."

CHOMBY studied the earthman. "I believe you would. In your world such a trait would be considered admirable. You are hard, Cappyupjohn, and brave. But it is not your kind that makes your race so great. Your world is a coward's world. It was built by men who are afraid."

Cappy choked. "You lie!"

"We have read your minds, earthmen," Chomby said. "We understand the civilization from the mental pictures you carry in your minds. You have great brains, but skilled as they are they are nothing in comparison with ours. It was not your brain that made your world, but your love of security. You feared wild beasts, so you killed them. You feared hunger, so you stored food. You built weapons to defend yourself against enemies. You sought out new worlds in fleeing from dangers of the old. If your race had not known fear, it would have never done these things."

"Men died to win that security," Cappy replied. "That wasn't cowardice, was it?"

"They died fighting, which meant that they hoped to win. Their chance of victory was more attractive than the insecurity that would come with defeat," Chomby replied. "My people wish to keep you here. He want to learn more about the emotion called fear that has made your civilization so great."

"You'll never keep us!" growled Cappy. His hand automatically touched the gun on his shoulder.

"That is the fear I speak of," Chomby said. "You would rather die than be a prisoner. In a different way Terryhall has the same emotion. But he does not risk so recklessly. He would rather avoid the situation that makes fighting necessary. He is a brave man, too, Cappyupjohn, but in a different way."

"He's yellow!" Cappy said vehemently. "He's worse than no help at all."

The earthmen rested, but they were not left alone. Chomby seemed always

to be near. Although Chomby insisted the earthmen were not prisoners, he made it plain they would not be allowed to leave for a time.

"We must study you," he said. "In turn, you may study us."

"I'm warning you, Chomby," Cappy roared. "We'll stand just so much of this thing. We'll stay until we've studied you enough, but when we want to go, we're going—or we'll die trying."

"That time is not here," Chomby said, wrinkling his lips again.

THE icy mental probing of the Mercurians grew familiar to Terry and Cappy. There was nothing the earthmen could think of that these eerie, repulsive-looking creatures did not understand. That the Mercurians read Terry's thoughts so easily was often embarrassing, for Terry knew that they were aware of his repugnance toward them, as well as Terry's distrust and fear.

But Chomby and his people seemed to accept Terry's opinion of them understandingly. Not one of them made a move to remove either Terry's or Cappy's guns.

After a first period of mental probing Chomby urged the earthmen to instruct the Mercurians in some simple crafts. Now the earthmen enjoyed the sense of superiority that previously had been a monopoly of the Mercurians. The simplest pieces of handiwork were almost beyond the Mercurians. The hands of these creatures, without thumbs and with stiff fingers, were clumsy. Weaving was an arduous task. Construction of a simple, primitive thatched dwelling was attempted and abandoned, when Cappy found that it would require months to complete. It was not because the Mercurians did not understand what had to be done—they knew this the instant the terrestrials pictured the idea in their minds. But the tasks were nearly impossible for the Mercurians.

Terry taught a few of the creatures to write, but the rest could not master the process, although every one of them had learned to read by watching Terry's mind at work.

Cappy grew more contemptuous of the Mercurians as he watched their bungling

efforts at the simplest human arts.

"We haven't anything to be afraid of from these creatures, Terry," he said.

Terry shook his head.

"They've got brains, Cappy. They know everything we know and a lot of things we don't. They read us like a book. They know our thoughts before we know them ourselves."

"It isn't thought that wins battles. It's power. Oh, brains help, but only when used in the application of the proper weapons. Why with our guns and fists we probably could lick this whole village. I'm sure they haven't coordination enough to fight hand-to-hand with us singly."

"But they're too smart to let us outmaneuver them," Terry said. "There's a principle that seems to work in society that makes me afraid of these Mercurians. In the history of our own planet, it has always been the brains which exploited the brawn among men. People who thought of things usually took ascendancy over those who tried to progress by the sweat of their brow. For instance, everyone knows Columbus discovered America, but who knows the name of the man who built the ships he sailed in? LeCompton designed the first successful spacecraft, but the name of the man who tooled the intricate parts of its mechanism and made it successful has been completely forgotten."

"You mean we're likely to become slaves of these—these Zombies?"

"Since we came to this village they've changed," Terry said. "These Zombies—as you call them—are learning fear. They see their world, lashed by cold and hot winds, freezing and roasting, as an insecure place. A violent storm might burn up their food supply, or freeze their crops. For the first time they've seen fear as a safeguard to their future. Now they want to build. They want places to store food; homes to protect them from cold. They want means of transportation, to escape uninhabitable spots. They know the value of fear, but they cannot conquer it because they are physiologically incapable of conquering their environment. When they realize this—if they don't realize it already—they'll force us to conquer their environment for them. Every earthman unfor-

fortunate enough to land on Mercury will become a slave—"

"Great Scott, Terry!" Cappy exclaimed. "I believe you are right. Your fear has been warning us all along to get out of this place. Get your gun ready, we're going back to the space ship—"

The light from the entrance of the cave was blotted out. Chomby stood before them, followed by a horde of his fellow beings.

"You recognized fear too late, Cappyup-john," Chomby said.

The two earthmen tried to level their guns, but the Mercurians attacked too quickly. The leathery fists struck home and the guns slipped from the earthmen's grasps.

A TRANSFORMATION occurred in front of the row of caves in the basalt cliff. Windbreaks appeared in the openings in the wall. Rude machines were set up to build houses of stone and covered passages from cave to cave. From the fibrous ferns Terry constructed rude looms for weaving cloth. Stone mills for grinding the pulpy fruit of the Mercurian trees into flour were designed.

How long the two earthmen had been prisoners on Mercury they had no way of telling, for there was neither night nor day, nor seasons in the twilight zone. But the Earth had disappeared over the south horizon and reappeared in the north and Cappy estimated that two-thirds of the Mercurian year of 88 days had passed.

"We won't be here another year," Terry said.

Cappy snorted. "I wouldn't bet." "They're getting careless," Terry pointed out. "They used to have a dozen men guarding us day and night. If we even got a little too far away from the village, we'd be shoved back. Now only one Zombie is guarding us. We're allowed to go almost anywhere, except near the spaceship."

"They read our minds, so they're always two jumps ahead of us, Terry. No. The principle of brains over brawn can't be beaten. We're licked."

"I'm not," Terry announced. "Once you called me a coward—you said I was

yellow. But a coward isn't the man who is afraid, it's the man that lets fear get the upperhand. You're being a coward now, Cappy. You're admitting that Chomby and his pals have the Injun sign on us. I'm not admitting it. It isn't brains that makes men the rulers of nine planets, and it isn't fear. Man has something else that gives him a physiological edge. I'm going to find out what that is. When we find it, we'll be free men again."

"When you find it, the Mercurians will know. They'll be ready to keep us from using the weapon—whatever it is—before we know we've got it."

"Some day we'll have a chance. Some day we'll have a chance to slug our guard and get back to the spaceship—"

Terry paused. He looked at the dozing Mercurian at the mouth of the cave. Even as Terry looked the Mercurian roused out of his sleep. The thought thread had roused the guard from a deep slumber.

"Now!" Terry yelled. "Now's our chance!"

Terry sprang. The guard tried to seize the stone club at his side, but his clumsy hand was not made for swift action. Terry was on him before the guard could send out a mental alarm and the young earthman's fist crashed against the base of the guard's skull.

Terrestrial muscles, built for a heavier force of gravity, delivered a sledgehammer blow. The guard toppled forward. Terry leaped over the figure and darted into the open.

Another figure rose before Terry, but again Terry's fist smashed.

Cappy was beside Terry now and together they raced toward the path that led in the direction of the spaceship.

"They'll follow us!" Cappy said. "They can trail us by our thoughts. If we miss the ship and have to double back, we'll run into them."

"We won't miss!" Terry said.

THE sudden formulation of the escape plan had been too quick for even the Mercurian brains to block. Terry and Cappy were racing into the forest of ferns far ahead of their pursuers. The coordinated muscles of the earthmen were

far more capable of traveling swiftly than those of the Mercurians behind and sounds of pursuit grew fainter in the distance.

But Terry knew that these creatures were dogged. They would follow until the spaceship's rockets blasted loose from the planet.

"Remember," Terry whispered, "don't act on any set plan. Don't plan what you'll do when you meet 'em. If you do they'll be prepared for it. Act on impulse, before they know what you intend to do."

"I'll remember," Cappy panted.

Was it impulse that made terrestrials the masters of the universe? Terry wondered. It hardly seemed logical, yet impulse had given them their first chance of freedom. But impulse might lead them astray. First thoughts are not always the best thoughts. True enough, man had made some strides by accident, but far more of his greatest discoveries and most useful inventions had been the result of years of labor and careful planning. No, it wasn't impulse. Some other weapon had to be used to defeat the Mercurians decisively. Terry and Cappy might escape through luck, but some day there would be a final, decisive battle that would employ the one thing that gave man an advantage over the semi-human monsters of the first planet.

Terry hoped he could discover that weapon now.

They had been over the route to the spaceship three times. Once in company with Chomby on their first trip to the Mercurian village. They had returned in company with a guard and come back again later.

Terry had noted a few landmarks and now he began to spot them again. A curious-shaped rock; a spring of moulten metal; a deep fissure in the soil.

But as they traveled toward the sun's corona the air grew warmer. Vegetation became profuse and the trail was more difficult to find. But Cappy had kept his eyes open, too. Between them they made their way, slower and slower.

Suddenly Terry stopped. An icy finger had passed over his brain. A wordless thought flashed into his consciousness.

"This is Chomby, Terryhall. Go back,

or you will be unmercifully killed."

Cappy looked at Terry. The same thought had flashed through his brain.

"I am ahead of you, earthmen. I am waiting in front of the spaceship. In my hands I hold a flourobeam gun. You cannot pass me, earthmen!"

Cappy groaned.

"They're still two jumps ahead, Terry! They've outfigured us again. They knew we might get away by accident. So they put Chomby out here to intercept us and he's armed with our weapons!"

Terry was afraid. He knew the power of a flourobeam. He'd seen it blast rocks into powder and he knew that a man could never survive its charge. One blast from the gun could wipe out all trace of Terry and Cappy.

Terry's face paled. Then, suddenly, he moved forward.

"Come on, Cappy! You said I was yellow once. Let's see who's yellow now!"

"But that gun! This isn't being brave! It's foolhardy. The better part of valor is knowing when you're licked."

"Come on," Terry said, moving ahead.

"You're a fool, Terry," Cappy said. "But you've got guts! Now listen to reason!"

But Terry would not listen. He moved forward. Cappy, sweating, came following.

"It's suicide!" cried the older man.

IN the center of a clearing stood the spaceship. The streaks of the corona revealed a figure, huge, hideous and ape-like, standing before the locks.

It was Chomby, holding the flourobeam gun, aiming at the two terrestrials who emerged from the forest.

"If you come closer, I'll shoot!" It was a thought, not a voice, that flashed toward the men, but the words were as clear as if Chomby had spoken.

"We're licked, Terry!" Cappy said. "I'll surrender."

Slowly Cappy's hands went over his head.

"And what about you, Terryhall?"

Terry stood in the clearing, looking at the Mercurian. The young man's face was pale and green beneath the corona glow.

"This is a war of the worlds, Chomby," he said. "It's a fight between your race and mine. It's a Waterloo for one of us."

"You haven't a chance, Terryhall. You know the power of this gun."

Terry's lips tightened into a thin, straight line. His body crouched for an instant and then he sprang. The terrestrial muscles sent him shooting toward Chomby. His feet touched the ground again, and like steel springs he shot forward a second time.

Chomby's fingers tightened on the trigger of the weapon. They seemed to twitch.

Cappy closed his eyes.

An inhuman scream rent the Mercurian air. But the gun did not go off.

Cappy opened his eyes to see Terry and the monster rolling on the ground. Terry's fingers were closed about the Mercurian's throat. Chomby struggled feebly, and then lay still.

Terry rose, picked up the gun and motioned to Cappy.

"Put down your hands and start moving your legs. Get into those locks before the rest of them get here!"

Cappy's jaw worked up and down, but words did not come from his throat. Somehow he moved. He ran into the locks and a moment later he was at the controls.

"Let 'er go!" Terry said.

Cappy, still speechless, pressed the charger. The rockets roared. The machine lurched skyward and Mercury was left behind.

"What happened?" Cappy asked.

"I just remembered that when we were last carrying the guns we had the safety catches on. The catches are released with the thumb. Chomby couldn't do it! He couldn't have shot me, even though he wanted to. The safety catches are such a small piece of the flourobeam mechanism that we never think of them. Chomby didn't have a chance to read our minds about the safety catch until it was too late."

"Terry," Cappy said. "I'll take back everything I said about you being yellow. You've got guts! More than I have, Terry."

"Guts? Hell, Cappy, I was scared to death every second."

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories.

Wilbur S. Peacock came into the office the other day, to discuss a new novelette he has slated for Planet. Since it was the first time we had met him personally, and remembering the fans' discussions about his stories, in the Vizigraph, we asked him to jot down a few facts that he thought would make an interesting Feature Flash.

This is what he told us:

I'm an old-timer when it comes to talking science-fiction. I was practically teetted on Planetary stories, starting back when Hugo Gernsback was the pioneer in the magazine field.

I just sort of graduated from reading them to writing them, along with yarns in other fields. And, frankly, I think I would prefer writing good stf-fiction to any other kind.

I've done a lot of travelling and studying in the past few years, primarily to enjoy living; secondarily, to give my writing that natural swing and rhythm that will get the readers' "Okay."

If I don't do as well as some of the others, it's not because I'm not trying, it's because I just can't. But hang around—I'll burn up a typewriter some day, and produce a really good yarn.

I'm one of those guys who thinks the "World of Tomorrow" is being born today, and if a yarn of mine gives a new thought or conception to a person now, I shall feel amply repaid for my efforts.

On the strictly personal side, I top six feet by a couple of inches, have the kind of shape that is used as the first picture in those "before and after" ads. I'm single, classified 1B by the army, and my idea of real exercise is the raising of my voice about twice a day.

I like to write, fish, read, loaf, and read the kisses and kicks about my stuff in the Vizigraph. Incidentally, I'm a Kansan.

VAMPIRE QUEEN

By THORNTON AYRE

"I'm mightier than the law!" Valcine Drew, Vampire Queen of the Starways, flung her challenge at the Interplanetary Patrol. Curt Stanley accepted the challenge—and stepped directly into a Jovian space-trap from which there was no escape.

Illustrated by Paul

I HAD been wondering for some little time why the Chief had summoned me with such urgency. However, being a well trained special agent of the Interplanetary Police I knew my place and kept quiet while he went through his papers, and generally attended to matters which were of no concern to me.

Then at length he glanced through the huge windows of the office and motioned me to his side.

"See her?" he asked quietly, nodding outside.

Here on the ground floor of the building we had a clear view of the square outside. The building opposite belonged to the Consolidated Trust, one of the biggest financial groups in the world and virtual backers of the Interplanetary Corporation itself.

Just emerging from the building was a slender girl in a cornflower blue costume of the time. She was blonde—flaxen blonde almost—and wore no hat. I could see her features were acquiline; her manner alert and decisive.

"What of her?" I asked the Chief presently, puzzledly.

"Ever see a woman without a soul, Curt?" the Chief asked me seriously, his lips tightening. "If not, now's your chance. That is Valcine Drew—or if you prefer it, 'The Granite Angel'."

I began to understand. Valcine Drew—mystery woman, incredibly wealthy—known among the lower dives by her queer appellation because she traveled the starry ways and was reputed to be inhumanly cruel.

It is never easy to reconcile beauty and viciousness; I certainly couldn't manage it in regard to this lovely girl.

"I've something to tell you about her," the Chief went on, watching her. "From the private reports I have received it is

more than clear that she is dodging the law somewhere. Take a good look at her: later you may need to meet her at closer quarters."

We watched her finally get into a sleek atomic roadster and make off for parts unknown. Cruel? Ridiculous! I began to suspect the Chief had gotten a bad dose of suspicion from the reports he had received.

Then he crossed over to his desk, motioned to me. There was no doubt of the gravity of his expression.

"Valcine Drew is a menace," he said. "From somewhere in space she keeps obtaining critanium mineral. Not just a few grams at a time but whole pounds of it! How she gets it is the mystery, and that is why we suspect it must be illegal. Naturally she sells it to the Trust and because of its immense value they buy it without question. But since we represent the law we have to look into it. It's a knotty problem to solve how she gets the stuff because our own ways of getting it demand skilled engineers. The stuff can only be obtained from Jupiter so far as we know, and Jupiter is a living hell as you realize. Twice a year our engineers get some of the mineral from there, and more often than not lose fifty percent of their men doing it. But this girl secures the stuff incessantly! How, I can't imagine. And it is your job, Curt, to find out."

I nodded slowly, thinking. "The only critanium deposits known to us are of course on Jupiter. It's inconceivable that she'd risk that deadly planet every time. Maybe she has found deposits of it somewhere else?"

"Maybe; but the fact remains the source isn't registered in the interplanetary claim files and it ought to be. So, it comes under the heading of piracy. Find out what she's up to. Get busy!"



Ice, rocks, mineral-ores—all crumbled in behind the fast moving globe, in the obliterating thunder of an avalanche.

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. To tell me to get busy was one thing: how to start was another. Evidently the Chief guessed my thoughts for he added, "Her ship will probably be at the Main Spaceport—the *Silver Eagle*. She takes on a fresh crew every trip, perhaps to prevent any one crew from getting too familiar with her ways."

"But can't you find out from a member of a dismissed crew what she's up to?"

"No. Fear of her striking back keeps mouths utterly sealed; and as yet we have no authority to make anybody speak. We need evidence. Your best course is to get yourself hijacked onto that ship and then figure out best how to get the proofs we need."

I nodded understanding' and then shortly took my leave.

I'd been seated an hour, soaking in thick weed smoke and listening to the buzz

of conversation around me, when things began to happen. The doors of the saloon suddenly sprang open and a man in immaculate blue uniform appeared. He stood with his arms at his sides just staring round.

He was quite the ugliest man I had ever seen. His face was square, brutally strong, with a projecting jaw scarred down one side. The lips were tight, unyielding: the eyes that gazed under the shiny peak of his cap were frosty blue. If one could forget the bullying, swaggering air he adopted, it had to be admitted he was a fine man—well over six feet and proportionately broad.

"Know him?" whispered the out-of-work engineer next to me. "That's first-mate Casper of the *Silver Eagle*, as tough a nut as ever prowled a catwalk."

"Stop your jabbering here for a minute!" Casper roared suddenly, glaring round. "Don't you know your damned manners when there's a lady around? Shut your traps, all of you!"

The quiet that followed was more of astonishment than respect for his command—astonishment at the sight of the lovely girl in blue who came in beside him. I watched her intently, noting how she entered this den of riffraff without the least timidity. Indeed she moved with urgency and authority, stood looking round on us all with supreme contempt.

Beyond a doubt she *was* beautiful; oval faced, flaxen-haired. But I began to understand something of what the Chief had said now I came to study her at close quarters. It was a face without a single redeeming quality of sentiment about it. It was cold, inhuman, granite indeed. And her eyes I noticed were a deep sea-green, enhanced if anything by fair, curling lashes and eyebrows.

"I want twenty men!" Her voice suddenly rang over the silence with the clearness of a bell. "And I said *men*! No namby-pamby rubbish for me. I want men of iron who'll battle the toughest fields in the spaceways; men who'll risk death. Twenty, I said. And you'll each be paid a thousand dollars apiece for the trip out and back. Let's have your offers."

She folded her arms and waited in insolent expectation. The man next to me grinned cynically.

"Not for me!" he murmured. "A thousand dollars to work under that she-cat and Casper. Not damned likely!"

"Work for the Granite Angel?" breathed another. "Hell, no!"

Casper's voice roared forth again. "What in hades has gotten into you? Unbutton your uncivil tongues and speak up! You heard the offer—thousand dollars for the round trip. Step up, and quick! If you don't I'll—"

"Well, you'll what?" yelled a derisive voice. "We got rights, remember, and you can't alter 'em!"

Casper's face colored rapidly and he took a step forward; but the girl restrained him. She looked round again and repeated her offer. At that one or two men began to rise and slowly make their way forward. To them no doubt a thousand dollars was worth plenty of grief, so when half a dozen or so had got on the move I joined too, shuffled along in my rubber space shoes until I was finally face to face with Casper.

"Name?" His flinty gaze swept me up and down.

"Stanley Curtis," I said, reversing my names. "Rocket hand."

"Here's your papers," he said brusquely, thrusting a bunch of identification sheets in my hand. "Take 'em to Main Spaceport and get aboard the *Silver Eagle*. Quick as you can. We take off at sundown."

I nodded, cast a sidelong look at the girl. All I got was the icy stare of her green eyes. I shambled out, puzzling to myself. The even closer look I had had of her face had convinced me her expression was more forced than natural: it was as though she were laboring under some immense tension or other. Had she relaxed only for a moment I could have imagined her as little short of adorable. Granite Angel, eh? It got me wondering.

I GOT aboard the *Silver Eagle* and went down into the rocket hold, that stifling quarter in the ship's belly where none but riffraff and special agents are ever found. With the other sullen-faced men I went about the job of attending to my particular rocket junjit, getting it all in order for the departure signal from the control room above.

After a while it came, in Casper's full throated bellow.

Off we went, our only indication of flight down here being the pressure of the gravity on the floor. It held us down for a moment or two as we made steady upward climbing; then it relaxed a little. We settled down to our job, sweating heavily.

Presently I left the others and went to the outlook port. No reason why I shouldn't: I had done all required of me at the unit for the moment. I stared out into space. Earth was dropping from us far below, and to right and left of us were Venus and Mars. They too were receding: clearly they were not intended as our destination. Jupiter was perhaps the answer after all, twinkling far away in the star-sprinkled backdrop.

Then suddenly the view was shut off as the steel slide of the port slammed shut. I had a vision of a blue coated arm clamping the combination lock. I twisted round to stare into Casper's square, grimly smiling face.

"Get back to your work," he ordered in a low voice. "Get back, before I beat the living daylight out of you! What do you think this is, a tour?"

"What's wrong with looking outside?" I asked calmly.

"Plenty so far as you're concerned! You're here to tend a rocket unit, not pry into things that don't concern you! Get moving!"

With a shrug I returned to my task, but there were murmurings from others among the crew. One remark evidently reached Casper for he swung round and came forward, hand resting on the butt of his flamgun.

"What was that you said?" His eyes blazed inquiry.

"I said who in hell do you think we are!" repeated one of the men. "We've the right to see where we're goin', ain't we?"

"Not on this ship you haven't! Your best course is to keep your trap shut and your mind on your job. It'll be healthier for all of you. Besides—"

Casper broke off and stood aside as the girl herself appeared at the top of the ladder. She came slowly down, looked round on the men.

"Trouble?" she asked Casper shortly.

"They don't like the window shields be-

ing drawn," he sneered. "Maybe they'd like a few feather beds to lie on too!"

The girl's stony gaze settled on us. "Perhaps my first-mate hasn't made things quite clear to you," she said slowly; "so I will. You will get your money when the trip is over. For that money you'll sweat your guts out down here watching these rockets. On board this ship there are no prying and peepings. You're here to work to the full, and under my command you'll do it. If any man dares to show a hint of mutiny, or is found slacking on the job, he'll be punished without mercy. I don't mean irons; I don't mean solitary. I mean death!"

I looked up at her sharply. "You haven't the authority to do that!"

"The law gives the master of the ship entire jurisdiction," she retorted. "On this ship there is only one law—Mine!" Then she stood eying me reflectively and added, "You sound pretty educated for an ordinary rocket hand. What are you doing here?"

"Money doesn't last forever," I said evasively.

SHE pondered that, her green eyes piercing me. Then with a final warning glance round she retreated up the ladder with Casper behind her. The trap slammed down. Not only that: it was locked. We were virtually imprisoned down in this hell hole with no conception of how to get out of it.

The big fellow who'd complained spat suddenly. "The dirty sun-fried hell-cat! I'll be damned if I'll stand for it! There are rules on all ships!"

"An' a special one for the ship run by the Granite Angel," commented another dryly. "I say we should lie low and stop trying to quiz. It's sticking out our chins."

This started an argument in which I'd no wish to take part. I had my own immediate problems to work out. The closing of the windows and trap door suggested important moves afoot, moves significant enough to be shut off from a crew anyway. It was essential I see something of what was destined to happen. How to get out of here, though? I looked around me for some sort of weapon with which to perhaps pry the

trapdoor, or else unseal the window. But I found nothing.

THIS problem occupied my mind for a long time afterwards, through several work and rest periods indeed, during which time we must have covered enormous distances across the gulf. Once I fancied I detected the zig-zagging course which pilots usually adopt to go through the asteroid belt. If that was so we were heading for the outer planets. Jupiter, no doubt, since it was the only known source of critanium.

Finally I made up my mind to take a chance.

"Listen, all of you," I said to my colleagues, arresting their attention from their work. "We've got to get action. Talking's no use. We're shut down here and for all we know we may be murdered or something before we ever sniff that thousand bucks. Am I right?"

They nodded sullenly.

"There's only one way to get our rights," I went on. "We've got to stop the ship! We'll cut out the rockets and refuse to start 'em again until this woman conforms to regulations and leaves the windows free and the trap open, so we can go up for a breather every now and again. That's the law, and we'll enforce it. Come on, cut off the power! Close the valves!"

Naturally I had my reason for all this and stood watching in grim satisfaction while they earnestly followed out my idea. I had figured that by this time we must be pretty close to the Jovian gravity field, and therefore probably quite close to whatever secret moves Valcine Drew was proposing to make. And perhaps I could escape from down here while the confusion was being sorted out.

It meant leaving a bunch of cut-throats to take the rap, but I felt I was justified. I had a job to do: they hadn't. Casper and the girl couldn't do much anyway since they were powerless without men to control the rockets.

I stood watching intently as at length all sources of power were cut out and the ship continued to cruise on smoothly of its own momentum. Then came Casper's roaring voice from the control room above.

"What the devil's wrong with you scum down there? Use your forward tubes! What do you want us to do? Crash?"

We maintained a stony silence at that. Sure enough Casper's heavy feet pounded over our heads along the steel corridor. The trap rattled and clanged as it was opened. He came hurrying down with a raygun in his hand. I took good care to edge my way behind him to the ladder.

"Well, what's the idea?" he roared, glaring round. "Which of you is responsible for this? Get the hell to work!"

Still nobody answered him, so he strode down among the men and struck out savagely with the butt of his gun. Instantly he became the focus for a concerted rush. I seized the chance to steal silently up the ladder, making no sound in my rubber shoes.

In a moment I had gained the narrow corridor above. Just in time I pressed myself into the recessed doorway of a storage room as Valcine Drew appeared from the control room, obviously bent on discovering for herself what was wrong. She hurried past me, never noticing, and began to descend into the rocket hold. I could hear the noise of a rising altercation, and above it all the roaring voice of Casper, the thud of fist on bone.

Quickly I looked around me. My next job was to find concealment and yet be able to watch what happened. Carefully I edged my way down the corridor to the control room. It was empty, of course, and woefully bare of any chance of concealment. Then I glanced above me—

The very thing! Up there in the roof was the air vent trap leading into the storage containers of the circular ceiling—a kind of loft. Fine! I leaped up to the girders, swung on them quickly, and eased my way through the vent trap into the wide space beyond. Gently I lowered the trap down again and lay full length, peering through its holes. Here indeed was perfect concealment.

From this position I could also see through the broad outlook window near the switchboard. My guess that we were near Jupiter had been right. The giant planet was filling all space outside—banded, clouded, mysterious, his Great

Red Spot about the only clear thing on his surface, and, as most of us pilots and spacemen well knew, the only habitable part of his surface.

Then there were his moons, all of them but briefly explored because of their inimical conditions. Frozen chunks of rock, most of them, some with vague pretensions to solidified air; others entirely without. Of the possibly habitable ones Ganymede came about the nearest. Bleak, inhospitable satellites circling round their equally unattractive primary. Right here indeed was a region where few ever ventured. Certainly the ordinary space runs never came this far; and the special ships for the critanium deposits only twice a year.

II

I LOOKED away from the window view suddenly as there were sounds beneath me. Casper and the girl came into the control room.

"Damned mutinous lot of scum," Casper breathed savagely, jabbing his gun back in his belt. He moved the controls and since the ship reacted instantly, I presumed he'd enforced order below.

"We've a mutinous bunch to hold down, Valcine," he said at length. "But I'll do it if I break them one by one!"

I lay watching in some surprise. This struck me as a queer way for a first-mate to address the commander of the vessel. It was an even bigger surprise to see the girl's face relax for a moment into a semblance of sympathy.

"I suppose we can't really blame them," she said slowly. "After all, pinned down there in that heat, all shields drawn tight—"

"Stop getting so damned sloppy!" Casper interrupted, and slipping the robot control in position for a moment he went over to a water-faucet. "Here," he said, handing her a glass of water. "Don't forget your medicine. Time for it."

Intently I watched. From her belt the girl took a glass phial and shook a tablet from it into the water. She said briefly, "Don't forget to make me up some more tablets. This is the last of this supply."

"I won't forget," Casper growled, and watched her drink off the draft steadily.

"That's better," she said, straightening up. "All right, let's get busy."

He nodded and I noticed there was a malignant grin on his face as he turned to the switchboard. I noticed too that Valcine had lost again that temporary look of compassion for the men below and was now standing grim and erect before the outlook port, studying the view.

From my position I saw the vessel was sweeping round to one of the moons of Jupiter. For a moment I had difficulty in placing it since most of them look alike. Then Casper cleared things up for me.

"More I see of this frozen hell of Ganymede the less I like it. But we picked a swell spot, Valcine. No guys in their right senses ever start prodding around places like this. I guess the only habitable spot in this whole gosh-awful region is the Great Red Spot up there."

The girl nodded silently, still gazing outside. I shifted my eyes from her to the window again as Ganymede loomed up in its entirety. Cold, ruthlessly desolate little world; hardly any air; puckered into rumples and folds of rock.

Mountains seemed to be everywhere, riven asunder by bleak gorges and deadly chasms. Slowly, very slowly, this maw reached up to catch the ship as Casper lowered it gently on its underjets. We came to rest at last in the depths of a valley, smeared with the mounds of frozen, congealed air. Down here all was dark, Jove himself hidden by the mountain ranges, the only illumination coming from the icy stars.

Silent, I lay watching, wondering what was coming next. Valcine Drew and Casper seemed to be waiting for something; and after a while I saw that Casper was steadily depressing a button on the switchboard. Outside, in response, was the winking of a powerful searchlight. A signal of sorts.

Then I beheld the answer to it. Lights were coming bobbing along the valley, for all the world like miners with headlamps heading for the pit. Nearer they came, each bearing on his space suited shoulders a heavy packing case of some kind. My mind flashed instantly to illegal critanium, then I realized this could

not be since it is radioactive and demands immensely heavy triple-lead containers, far heavier than a man can lift even on Ganymede's light-gravity surface.

"Open the airlocks," Valcine Drew said suddenly.

The valves opened one by one so no vital air escaped the control room. The first man entered, dumped his case down, then unloosed his space suit. He was not familiar to me, but from his hard bitten face and tattered uniform I placed him instantly as an ex-pilot of the spaceways, obviously fired for some misdemeanor or other. He stood looking at the girl sullenly.

"There's a dozen of 'em this time," he announced. "It's worth ten thousand dollars to you."

"You'll get five thousand and no more," she retorted, gazing at him. "Fetch them in—the rest of them."

The man hesitated, burst out suddenly, "Look here, Angel, what in hell do you think me and my buddies are? Why do you think we rot out our bones in this dismal hell? Just for you to cut our prices in half? Like hell! We've been stuck here for a year now, hunting up Ganymedians."

"And getting paid for it," the girl interrupted him coldly. "If anything you're overpaid, the whole lot of you. What more do you want?" she proceeded angrily. "I saw to it you had a comfortable base camp, food for two years, ample air—everything you need. All you have to do is hunt and collect money. In a few more trips you'll be worth a fortune. You'll stick it and like it! Don't forget you can't please yourselves, either. One word from me and the whole twelve of you are finished. There's a nice cosy lethal chamber waiting for all of you back on Earth. This is the only place in God's universe where you're safe, and you know it!"

The man was silent, biting his lip.

"Bring the rest in," she added briefly.

HE turned and signaled into the airlock pressure room hidden from my view. One by one the spacesuited men came in, each carrying a crate. The whole dozen were finally dumped. Then Valcine Drew went to the nearest one and snapped open the side. In the interior was something I had hardly expected to see—a small

humanlike creature with a big head and slender green body. The eyes were like those of a cat; the face ridiculously small and screwed up into an expression of obvious fright.

"Queer looking devils these Ganymedians," Casper grunted, standing looking at the creature. "Queer or otherwise we've plenty of use for 'em, eh? Come on you—out!" and he kicked out his heavy boot, sent the little creature sprawling out of the confinement of the crate onto the floor.

"Always remind me of animated lozenges," he grinned. "Kick your foot right through 'em if you wanted to."

He raised his foot to kick again, purely for his own brutal amusement—but the girl stopped him.

"Give them their money," she snapped; and turning to them, "You can have the crates back when we're through. Make it in six hours."

Casper went over to the cashbox and handed over the money, bundled the men roughly from the control room and slammed the airlocks after them. Through the window he watched their lamps go bobbing away into the distance.

To me all this had a definite interest. I wondered what the devil the idea was of Ganymede; even more the purpose of the poor inhabitants of this inhospitable little moon. Frail, brittle looking beings, obviously attuned to temperatures far below zero and an air too thin to ever support an Earthly form of life.

Even now the one Casper had kicked onto the floor was starting to gasp painfully in the pressures of the control room. Noticing it the girl promptly lifted him in her arms and dumped him in an upright glass case in a corner of the room. She clamped down a lid, contemplated his frightened little face for a moment, then shifted a control on the switchboard.

I saw tubes inside the case start glowing with energy. Two particular prongs turned violet and projected almost, but not quite, to the top of the creature's shiny head. What sort of black magic was she up to now I wondered.

"Listen to me," she said steadily, holding a microphone to her mouth. "I'm giving you instructions. Since you possess no ears my words will reach you through bone vibrations—telepathically, since that

is your way of communicating. Nod your head if you understand what I'm saying."

The head nodded vigorously.

"Good," the girl said. "Here are your instructions: In a moment or two you will be put inside a small, globular safety ship. It will be guided by radio from this vessel. You will be sent to Jupiter, to a chosen spot, and once you land you will operate three switches connected to magnetic anchors on the ship's exterior. I should say levers, not switches, since they are too heavy to be moved by radio and need somebody like you. They will be marked A, B and C so you cannot mistake them. On landing pull them in that order. Is that clear?"

Again came the urgent nodding.

"When that is done, which will take no more than a few minutes, radio power here will withdraw your ship back. That will end your particular task and you will be released."

There the girl finished her communication. To me, bits of the puzzle were beginning to fit into place. It was the cold inhumanity of the idea that made me shudder. For Jupiter, biggest of all the worlds, has a gravity field of such overwhelming force that only the smallest of ships and toughest of men had ever defeated that upward drag from the planet. Going down was bad enough: coming up was sheer hell and had accounted for more pilots and engineers than I cared to remember.

Here, to save herself or her unscrupulous first mate from disaster, the girl was using slave labor. Nothing else. It was cunning—vicious. I began to realize at last how she had collected such huge amounts of critanium. I began to realize too why she had such a reputation for cruelty, and above all why nobody below was permitted to observe what was going on.

At a nod from the girl Casper went over to a valve and unscrewed it. Beyond I could see a small, but quite roomy, globe spaceship of the safety-type—not unlike a bathysphere. Into this the girl lifted the Ganymedian and then shut the airlock on him. Casper closed the valve again and pulled a lever.

"Your father would have given plenty for a system as good as this, Valcine," he muttered. "Pity he was so sentimental: it killed lots of his chances, and I could never

talk sense into him. You and me have done a lot together, eh?"

"Shut up, I'm busy," she answered tensely.

I COULD not see immediately what happened but I guessed that explosive forces had driven the globe out through a tube into space. Valcine Drew waited a moment then turned to the radio instruments, watching a visiplat intently as the globe came into view. Carefully she began to operate the remote-control apparatus, Casper watching intently over her shoulder.

Her silence irritated me for I had felt I was on the verge of learning something worthwhile. I looked at the visiplat keenly. There, twirling down toward Jupiter, a mere black speck against his swirling cloud belts, was the solitary globe. At last it vanished in the cloud-banks, but the X-ray television never once lost track of it.

Eventually I saw it land on an unthinkably desolate plateau beneath a sky of twilight dark. The landscape, so far as I could see, was studded with gray lumps rather like dirty snow. Some of them moved visibly as the globe alighted amidst them, began to draw toward it under the pull of the magnetic anchors.

"It's a masterpiece," Casper breathed. "A virgin field of critanium. We got it by accident. Rather queer to think of those suckers from Earth digging for the stuff twice a year and we know the exact spot where it lies around loose. I tell you, Valcine, you and me have got about the best brains in the System."

She didn't answer. Her whole attention was on the controls. Finally she snapped a switch and sparks flared from the globe. It began to rise again, a whole mass of gray lumps clinging to it like barnacles to a ship. Gradually it began to rise back toward Ganymede, became larger on the screen.

Casper moved over to the outlook port and began to give directions as he watched the sky. Then when he bundled on a space-suit and went outside I guessed the globe had arrived back again. The girl operated switches on the control board and there came a rumbling thud from the firing tube. Evidently the globe had been drawn back into place by magnetism ready for the next trip.

Then there were other sounds from a re-

moter part of the ship. Valcine Drew waited impatiently; until at length Casper returned holding the Ganymedian by one arm. He tossed down the limply dangling body as though it were a rag doll and then commenced to take off his space suit.

"He's dead," he shrugged, seeing the girl's glance. "Died, the same as they all do under the strain of leaving that hell-fired world. Well, it was worth it. He cleaned up about a million dollars' worth of mineral that time. I've put it in the safety locker."

The girl nodded composedly. "Ship okay for the next trip?"

"All set and ready."

I'd heard of a few cold blooded rackets in my time as special agent but this had them all licked. Suddenly I thought of my micro-camera. Carefully I eased it into focusing position as the girl fired her ray pistol at the dead Ganymedian. I caught her in the very act of destroying him while Casper looked on. And I did something else too. I slipped in trying to get a better vantage point for a second photograph.

INSTANTLY two pairs of eyes stared I up at the ventilator. I put my camera away promptly, waited. Just for a moment I saw real fear leap into Valcine Drew's lovely face, then it froze again into bleak hate. A gun flashed in her hand. Almost as quickly Casper yanked one out too. He reached up with a long rod and slammed up the hatchway, stared into my face.

"You!" A start shook him. "What in hell do you think you're doing there? Come down, damn you!" he roared.

Slowly I obeyed, dropped to the floor. The girl got up grimly from the control board, her green eyes blazing at me with unholy fury.

"How did you get up there?" Her voice was low, deadly.

"I climbed. I engineered trouble below, then while you and Casper here quelled it I did a bit of muscling up. Simple, eh?"

"Don't try and be funny with me!" she spat back. "I've had my suspicions of you from the very first. In the confusion down in the hold I never noticed your absence."

"I counted on that," I murmured.

"You're no ordinary rocket hand," she

went on slowly. "Just who are you?"

"Just an adventurer," I smiled, and for that smile I was rewarded with a stinging slap in the face from the palm of her free left hand. I kept my grin as it was and that seemed to infuriate her even more.

"You've seen everything!" she panted. "You know—"

"I know you are slave trading through the aid of a bunch of wanted murderers," I nodded. "I know too you are deliberately killing Ganymedians to gain critanium mineral and save your own skin and Casper's here. I know you're building up a fortune through methods pretty similar to those adopted by a one time Simon Legree. But one day, Valcine Drew, the law is going to catch up with you."

"Only if you talk," she said coldly. "I can stop that! If I choose I could have your tongue torn out so you couldn't speak; your hands amputated so you couldn't write. I did that once to a man who thought he could cross me."

"Perhaps that was where you got the name of the 'Granite Angel'?" I asked quietly.

Her only immediate response was a look of such icy fury that I knew she was quite capable of carrying out her threat. Then all of a sudden she turned aside and drummed impatiently on the control bench.

"All right," she said slowly, thinking; "since you are so anxious to poke your nose into my affairs you might as well go the whole hog. You saw what happened to him?" She gestured in contempt to the Ganymedian.

"Well?" I asked.

"You can die being of service to me: that's fitting. You'll get into that safety globe and go to Jove, operate the three levers and bring back the next load of critanium."

"What makes you think I will? You're not dealing with a Ganymedian now, Angel. I'm an Earthman."

"If you don't," she stated, coming back to me, "I'll not withdraw the globe from Jupiter until you've died out there, alone, unable to move. I'll throw a negative power over the driving controls which will lock them. I'll destroy you. See?"

"Are you doing this because you're afraid to kill me outright with that pop-gun of yours?" I asked dryly.

Her eyes flamed again. "I'm not afraid of anything! But I happen to have a crew to bring back to Earth. One short would raise an inquiry, especially if that one was found to have flame gun wounds as the cause of death. If, however, you died from pressure and spacestrain—not uncommon in space and unavoidable when leaving Jupiter—I'd have a legitimate reason for your demise. I like to play safe with the law."

I daresay I could have played my cards well enough to make her change her view, only I didn't. As a matter of fact another idea had formed in my mind, and it was well worth putting to the test. I noticed she looked surprised when I gave a slow nod.

"You win, Angel," I said quietly. "Though I'd remind you I'm none too sure Jupiter *will* kill me. I'm no brittle man of Ganymede, remember, I'm two hundred and twenty pounds of Earthman."

"If Jupiter doesn't oblige, I will—and take the consequences," she retorted. "Now get into that safety-globe."

Shrugging, I moved to the valve and unscrewed it, clambered into the globe beyond and sank into the cushioned seat at the controls.

III

SUDDENLY the valve slammed shut again. Radio control also closed the airlock. I sat back and waited. All of a sudden I was seized with the most ghastly sinking sensation as the globe went hurtling outwards from the tube, flinging me tight back in my seat. Staring through the port I saw I was spiraling high over the rocky surface of Ganymede.

The view changed as I seemed to turn a somersault and found Jupiter suddenly below me with his heaping cloudbanks. The radio remote control was in full sway now, guiding the globe unerringly on the same course as before. In these few minutes of trip I had the chance to study the radio equipment, satisfied myself that a few brief conversions could make it suitable for ordinary short-wave transmission. That was what I wanted, later.

Again I turned my attention to the outlook port. In all directions, once I struck the cloud belts, there was just fog and

nothing more—fog blown into a million wraiths and shapes by the eternal winds which roar over Jove's surface; ammonia winds, blasted by hurricanes of between four and five hundred miles an hour in velocity.

Certainly there is no planet in the System more grim than Jupiter, a planet whereon no big space machine had ever dared to land for fear it might never again depart from the giant's toils, or else because of the ever present hazard of meeting destruction in the furious hurricanes. Only a small globe such as the one I was in stood any real chance by very reason of its shape.

The temperature gauge showed me what I already knew—that the external temperature was minus two hundred Fahrenheit; the air-sampler confirmed the presence of ammonia, methane, and other deadly gases in profusion.

Swiftly, still under radio control, the globe dropped until the clouds suddenly cleared and I burst on an inimical landscape. I was directly over the plateau I had seen in the X-ray telescreen—that plateau of gleaming, glassy black, frozen solid and marked here and there by the grayish lumps of the precious mineral deposits.

The lower I dropped the more I disliked the view. I cannot conceive of anything more desolate. Buffeted and battered by the atmospheric twists I went lower and lower, staring at the jagged peaks of the valley. They reared up like black towers, their basic darkness not entirely concealed by the sheen of eternal ice covering them. Half way up their Cyclopean heights the mists were swirling, blotting them out. I had only my imagination to tell me what sort of a hell must exist at the top of those monsters.

Once I landed I did more things than pull the levers to attract the critanium. I made a few tests of Jove's surface for the first time in my life. Atmosphere pressure and quality I already knew: the other thing I discovered was the vast pull of the gravity, so enormous I could scarcely move my jaws without experiencing pain. My hands suddenly weighed tons. I thanked God I was seated for it enabled my heart to keep a fairly steady though labored action. Certainly there was a gravity nullifier on the control board which would have put

things right, only like every other switch it was locked by radio power.

Despite the physical distractions I was interested in the exterior. The ground was flint-hard, scored into innumerable rifts and furrows by the swirling hurricanes, blowing in their track monstrous surges of pebbled dust which had gouged out tracks in the ice-caked rocks. Without doubt Jupiter is no place for a vacation.

Then all of a sudden the radio controls operated again and I found myself being borne upwards with the globe once more. Hell gripped me. I gasped and choked under the strain of forcing against that titanic gravity. I realized in those moments why the weak, fragile Ganymedians had been destroyed once their job was done. Strong though I am I was doing everything in my power to protect my life. I conserved my breathing, made no movements, was gratefully content to even retain consciousness at all.

Nor did the strain weaken much for the pull of Jupiter is as strong when near Ganymede as it is when close to the surface. The only relief was when the accelerating motion ceased and I was gripped by Ganymede's own field. Swiftly the globe spiraled back to the satellite's desolate surface, landed finally only a few yards from the *Silver Eagle*.

Magnets got to work and pulled it back into the tube. I don't think I saw two faces ever look so surprised as Casper and the girl's as I stepped forth unharmed through the valve into the control room.

VALCINE DREW studied me for a moment, then she said briefly to Casper, "Go and see the minerals are fixed."

She waited until he was gone in his space suit then advanced toward me slowly, playing with her gun.

"So the big fellow is tough," she murmured.

"Can't say I didn't warn you." I shrugged.

"Pity it failed," she said bitterly. "I'll have to use the other way after all."

"Before you do," I interrupted her, as she leveled her gun, "there is something you ought to know. You could never have known it if you hadn't sent me to Jupiter as you did. You see, you're just wasting your time collecting critanium."

"Oh, I am! I'm quite satisfied," she answered curtly.

"But you wouldn't be if you'd seen what I've seen," I insisted. "Down in that Jovian valley are whole seams of tranite-x! You can't see it in that teleplate of yours because it's below surface, but it's there. I've seen it. I don't suppose I have to add that tranite-x is worth three times as much as the stuff you keep collecting?"

Her gun lowered as she stared at me. Then Casper came back and took off his helmet. She turned to him quickly.

"You ever hear of tranite-x?"

"That's all I have done—hear of it," he grunted. "Frozen mineral deposit used for medical services. What about it?"

"There are whole seams of it waiting to be frisked up on Jove," I answered him. "Just below the surface ice. And that," I finished, looking back at the girl, "means real money."

They were silent for a moment, then Casper looked at me in ugly suspicion.

"What's the idea, feller? You trying to buy your liberty or something?"

I eyed him steadily. "I'm suggesting we forget our differences and get the stuff while we can. Two crates of that will make all your critanium sales look like pocket money. If you're willing, Angel, I'll take you with me and show you the exact spot. We can soon decide on the disposal method."

She hesitated for a long moment.

"Afraid?" I asked cynically; and that made her flush.

"Of course I'm not afraid! I'm just thinking that it might be dangerous to lower the *Eagle* to Jove. We might never get away again."

"We wouldn't," I confirmed grimly. "Our only chance is to use the globe. There's room enough for the pair of us, anyway."

"All right," she said slowly. "We can't afford to pass up a chance of getting tranite-x. I'll get some samples first and bring them back for examination. If it's the real thing we'll have the Ganymedians mine all they can."

"Better put some instruments in the ship—electric cutters and so forth," I advised. "That ice is going to take a lot of smashing open."

She nodded and motioned Casper. Still

eying me with some doubt he put the necessary tackle into the globe, then stood aside. I clambered through the airlock into the spare seat next the control board, and the girl followed me a moment later. Casper slammed the airlock with a viciousness that clearly expressed his suspicions were deep.

I smiled grimly to myself and eyed the girl as she detached the radio remote control equipment and shifted the power levers. Casper released the power which gave us the initial send off from the tube; immediately the girl had the globe under control and we were dropping toward the storm-swept surface of Jupiter.

I sat in dead silence, but I was doing plenty of thinking. Finally my gaze dropped to the flameweb in the holster at her waist. Abruptly, before she had the least chance to grasp my intention, I'd whipped the gun free and leveled it straight at her.

She glared at me tigerishly with those green eyes of hers, but she didn't take her hands off the controls. She dared not.

"What's the idea?" she demanded savagely.

"Just to make sure I have the initiative," I smiled. "Keep on driving and you'll be okay. Two people can play with a gun, Angel, and I'm not exactly an amateur either. Keep your hands on those switches!" I snapped, as for a moment she released them.

Her face set she looked through the port upon the swirling scum of Jove below. I don't think I ever saw such bleak fury on a woman's face before. It was more than anger at being tricked; it was a sheer baleful malice out of all proportion with the situation. And suddenly it must have mastered her, for her hands left the controls again.

Violently she swung in her seat and dived for my face. Just in time I jerked my head back but even at that her long, sharp nails dug savagely into my cheek. I felt the trickle of warm blood.

"You think you can do this to me?" Her voice was a positive screech as she leapt up and battered away at my head with her fists. "You clumsy great fool! You can't—"

"The switches!" I reminded her hoarsely. "We're falling!"

SHE was too blind with fury to notice it so I leaned across to them. Seizing her chance she picked up a spanner and brought it down with stinging force across my wrists. My hands went numb. Controlling the globe was hopeless. Helplessly I fell back in my seat, the gun dropping from my unfeeling hand. Then it was leveled at me. I stared into the girl's cruel face as she tossed the tumbled hair out of her eyes.

"Get out of that chair, you no account space tramp!"

I moved slowly.

"Quickly!" she yelled, suddenly directing a startled glance through the window. "We're falling!"

She dived to hurry me out of the chair and I saw her hand slide up to the gun button. In self preservation I did the only thing possible—delivered a right uppercut which hit her straight under the jaw. She collapsed her length on the metal floor.

Right then I'd no time to notice her. Frantically I worked on the controls, but I was unfamiliar with them. In any case we had dropped into the full tug of Jupiter's field and were whizzing downwards with diabolical speed through dense cloudbanks.

I stared out into the pall in horror.

Then we landed. The shock was terrific. I was pitched right out of the chair and landed against the padded wall. From outside came the crash of rending ice; then the globe started to roll over and over like a fast traveling snowball, came to halt finally amidst the rasp and crackle of crumbling ice shards. Somehow, dazed and bumped though I was, I managed to retain my senses.

Carefully I moved again, but the iron weights of Jupiter had sway once more. With superhuman effort I crawled to the port and stared out. All was unnaturally dark, for Jupiter has a surface twilight glow. I fingered the switches until I found the one to operate the external searchlight.

The blaze showed me we were not on the surface of the planet at all but in some kind of glassy cavern, its walls made up of sheer, black ice. For a long time I puzzled over the situation, then heard Valcine Drew moan slightly. Immediately I returned to her and with considerable difficulty hauled her into a chair. Her weight was stupendous.

Slowly she came back to consciousness, fingering her jaw. Then as remembrance flashed back into her brain her green eyes blazed malevolently and she reached out for the gun on the floor. I was a shade quicker however and slipped it in my trousers' belt.

"You won't need it," I told her briefly. "In fact neither of us will. Unless I miss my guess we're going to be lucky if we either of us get out of this alive."

That got her on her feet, with a strain that brought anguish into her lovely face. She stumbled to the control board and closed a switch. Immediately the weights fell from us as Earthnorm was established in the floor. Then she went over to the port and stared outside with me. Finally her hate-filled gaze turned to me.

"This is your doing, you clumsy idiot! We must have crashed through the surface ice into an underground hole or something."

She turned to the radio and switched it on. Then as I leaned over and prevented her seizing the microphone she stared at me fixedly.

"If you're going to send for help from Casper, or try and get him to remote control the ship out of this mess, you've another think coming, Angel!"

"Don't be an idiot! We can't just wait here and die!"

"If there's any way out we'll find it for ourselves," I said grimly. "Get away from that instrument. Go on!" I roared, as she hesitated.

I think it was her surprise at my action more than anything else that made her obey. Roughly I elbowed her aside and switched on the instruments for myself. My earlier plan to convert the radio-apparatus was unnecessary now since she'd done it for me.

"Calling Space Patrol," I intoned into the microphone, and watched the girl out of the corner of my eye. "Calling Space Patrol . . ."

Her expression changed, and the moment it did so she dived for me furiously, made to grab the microphone and smash it. I struck her over the wrist with it. She fell back, holding her hand painfully.

"I owed you that one," I said dryly, tugging out the gun and leveling it at her. "Take it easy—Hallo there! Space Patrol?

Special agent Stanley speaking. Pick up a pirate space machine by the name of *Silver Eagle* and hold the crew and first mate Casper for full inquiry. The charge is illegal ore trading. The ship is located on Ganymede, north position. You will hold it there until further orders from me."

SUDDENLY, my attention diverted from her for a moment, Valcine Drew acted. She lifted a heavy stool and whirled it with devastating force. It crashed into the microphone and shattered it, drove a dent through the control panel. Instantly of course, the apparatus went dead.

"A space cop, eh?" she shouted hoarsely. "I might have known it! Well, you might get Casper but you'll not get me! A space cop!" she went on savagely. "You're worse than we are! You were willing to do a deal in tranite-x, and now it's failed you are trying to get me, Casper, and my critanium mineral. You cheap, dirty double crosser!"

"Finished?" I asked impassively.

"Not yet! You're nothing but a—"

"There is no tranite-x," I stated quietly; then as her green eyes blazed in furious amazement I went on, "That was a simple gag to get you away from the *Eagle*. I wasn't fool enough to think I could capture you and Casper single handed when you had the radio and all the advantages. The only way was to divide your forces, so to speak. Casper will be nabbed by the S.P., just as I'd planned, but my original intention to fly you in this globe to the S.P. headquarters in the Asteroid Belt will have to be altered. So far as you are concerned the plan's slipped up. But believe me, Angel, your racket's busted wide open from now on. Especially so with the evidence I've got with a micro-camera, providing I ever get away to use it. Even without it, though, your mining days are over."

She folded her arms and smiled cynically. "And what does the copper do now?"

"Nothing," I shrugged. "Thanks to what you've done to the radio we're stuck. I can't tell the Space Patrol to come for us, as I'd intended a moment ago. Anyway I doubt if their big machine could risk the gravity and hurricanes. So our only course is to find the way out for ourselves."

"And if we do, you hand me over? Count me out!"

I got up, eyed her grimly. "Listen, Angel, I'm not asking for death even if you are. There's got to be some way out, and I'm going to find it."

"All right; I'm not stopping you. But if we get out it means death to me, so why should I help?"

"Only because death *here* means slow suffocation," I said quietly. "But maybe you prefer it that way?"

She was silent, dropping her gaze. Then as though suddenly thinking of something she fingered inside the pouches on the belt she wore and pulled out a phial—that same phial I had seen her use aboard the *Eagle*. She took the cork out of it, then stared at its emptiness dumbly. A curious expression was on her face as she put the phial back.

"Perhaps you're right," she said abruptly. "I've got to get away from here— I've *got* to. If I don't, it means far more than death for me."

IV

I PUZZLED over her remark for a moment.

She seemed on the verge of explaining herself; then suddenly changed her mind.

"We'll look around outside," she said, and hauled two space suits to view. We were inside them in a few seconds, then armed with cutters and flashlamps we scrambled through the airlock.

We were in an ice cavern all right, virtually buried. Looking around, we could see clearly what had happened. The ship had smashed through a mass of surface ice into a depression in the ground, bringing tons of ice blocks down on top of it. Inside here, where the ship was buried, was the pocket in the ice with heaven knew how much thickness of ice above us. We were inside a natural bubble with unguessably thick walls. To strike upward was far too dangerous: we might precipitate an avalanche.

I linked up our helmet phones and said, "We might stand a chance at the end of the pocket there," and I nodded to where the hollow came to an end. "If that is where the bubble ends we can work our

way upwards at an angle; that should prevent any chance of a collapse."

She nodded inside her helmet and, nailed down by the huge gravity and our studded boots skidding on the ice, we struggled forward, finally reached the solid, glittering wall which barred our one possible avenue to escape.

We went to work with our vibrator gauges first, devices which told us by etheric recoil waves exactly how thick was the barrier in front of us. It was fifteen feet, as compared to forty and fifty feet in other directions.

"Well?" the girl asked finally, looking at me.

"We drive through," I said. "Let's get started."

I trailed the extension cables of our cutters back to the ship and connected them to the power plant, then each of us with a cutter apiece we set to work on the wall, standing our ground amidst the bombardment of flying ice fragments and solidified mineral deposits. It was dangerous work for the stuff was as sharp as glass. One direct impact on our space suits might very easily have made a fatal tear. However, fortune was with us.

But it was slow, grueling work in that crushing gravity. And at the end of an hour our spacesuit air tanks were running low: we had consumed a surprising amount of oxygen with our exertions and strain, and all we had to show for it was a penetration of two feet and a width of perhaps ten, just enough for the globe to pass through.

Wearied, we went back to the ship and relaxed gratefully in the Earth-norm gravity. Once I'd locked the door, I switched on the air supply to the full for a while, but a quick glance at the gauge showed me we had to husband every scrap of our supply.

"Any rations aboard?" I asked Valcine anxiously.

She nodded her blonde head tiredly toward a cupboard. In it I found a plentiful supply of canned concentrates. Far more food indeed than we could ever use with our air supply so low. In silence I put out a meal.

"Pull up," I said briefly, and Valcine drew a chair over and sat down, to moodily regard the meal. I ate in silence for a

long time before I noticed she wasn't touching anything. All she did was take a drink then relapse into moody quiet again.

As on that other occasion on the *Eagle* she had at the moment lost her look of frozen viciousness and instead looked distressed, human. I was trying to figure it out to myself when she glanced at me sharply as though divining my thoughts.

"How long do you think it'll take us to get free?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Five more shifts, I guess—if we're lucky. It depends if the air supply will hold out that long."

At that she unbuckled the pouched belt from about her waist and began a meticulous search of its various pockets. I watched in puzzled interest. She tipped out a variety of feminine trifles onto the table—then at last with almost a yelp of delight she pounced upon a small round tablet and flaked away the dust which was adhering to it.

Her whole manner had changed miraculously. Gone utterly was her tiredness. Quickly she hurried to the water faucet and filled up a glass, but before she could drop the tablet into the water I had grabbed it from her outstretched palm. I had remembered that other tablet back on the ship.

"What is this stuff?" I asked her curtly.

"Give it to me, please!" Her voice wasn't cold and commanding; no, it was desperately entreating. She put the glass down and stared at me urgently.

"Why?" I insisted. "What does a girl like you in the prime of health need with tablets anyway?"

"Prime of health!" She laughed hollowly. "If you only knew how funny that is!"

I stared at her. "But I don't understand."

"If you must know, I have space fever," she interrupted. "I've had it for a year now. You know what it does unless tablets of calrax are taken regularly every five hours. It seeps into your bones, slowly destroys the nerves, brings horrible agonizing death. Only by these tablets can I keep myself in anything like normal health. Give it to me! All this is Casper's fault. I came off on this trip without getting a fresh supply from him. I'm lucky to find this odd one."

I LOOKED at her fixedly, still holding the tablet. I have seen space fever in all its phases, and I know it produces certain unmistakable signs even when the sufferer uses calrax to antidote it. For instance, it leaves the whites of the eyes muddy and yellow; it contracts the pupils; it makes the hands knotted as though with acute arthritis. Yet Valcine Drew had none of these symptoms.

"Who told you you have space fever?" I demanded.

"Casper of course. I got it on one of our trips and he made up these tablets for me—has done ever since. . . . Oh please give me that tablet!" she nearly screamed. "I feel ill! I've got to have it!"

"In a moment," I said, and hurrying over to the microscope I put the tablet on the slide, studied it carefully. She did not interfere but watched with itching impatience. I saw plenty through the lenses which startled me.

"Valcine," I said slowly, looking up, "there's a lot about you that I'm only just beginning to understand. For instance, your harshness, your disregard of all law, your stubborn courage. To speak plainly, you've poisoned yourself with these tablets until you couldn't help but be that way! Or rather Casper has seen to it that you have poisoned yourself!"

"What do you mean." She stared at me bewilderedly.

"I mean that this pill is not calrax! I know the stuff backwards. It's olvis-root powder made into a pill and bound with some sort of glucose. Do I have to tell you what even a few grains of olvis-root will do?"

The color drained still more from her pale face. From the utter horror in her eyes I could see she knew as well as I that olvis-root is deadly poison, obtainable from Venus' toxic lands.

"It—it deadens the nerves, alters the impulses, destroys fear, operates on every gland secretion," she breathed, half to herself. "Yes, yes, I know what it does. God, now I begin to see! What I contracted was nothing more than a touch of space radiation perhaps; it's common enough. That devil Casper started to feed me olvis-root poison tablets in quantity enough to change my entire nature as long as the effect lasted. Yes—that's it!

Now I know the reason why he never missed telling me the times for my pills. I thought it was concern for my welfare— The beast! The filthy, dirty beast!"

She sat down heavily, staring at me. Then she went on,

"Before I had space fever, or whatever it was, I used to work with my father in legitimate ore mining. Casper wanted us to do it illegally and make a fortune. I think, though I can't prove it, that he killed dad in order to put his devilish plans into effect. When dad died, I was left alone in space with Casper. He tried to force me to agree to piracy, and I wouldn't. It was against all my natural principles.

"Then I was taken ill, and I see now that it was since then that I have been a changed woman. Cruelty suddenly appealed to me; sadism was as natural as breathing. I was proud of my name of 'The Granite Angel.' So Casper deliberately destroyed my real nature to make me a willing ally—to make me the scapegoat for everything when justice caught up."

Suddenly she dropped her flaxen head to her restless hands. Just as quickly she got up and started pacing agitatedly.

"Don't you see what he's done to me? I cannot live now without the drug! Every time I lost my sense of courage and harshness he gave me a tablet, and in this one tablet here is my one chance of preserving my life until I can get more. Without them the reaction is deadly. Insufferable weariness; a slow decline into death. Anybody knows that olvis-root victims die swiftly if the supply is stopped."

She stopped, staring at me. I wish I could fully describe the wild loveliness of her now she was temporarily herself. I freely admit I wanted nothing more than to take her in my arms and swear the most impossible resolutions in order to save her. But being a trained realist I tried instead to find a way round the problem.

"Whatever happens," I said quietly, "you are not going back to your old role. I'd sooner see you dead than that. If I read your true character aright you'd sooner be dead than. . . ."

SHE stood facing me, hands clenched at her sides. Abruptly I decided the issue by dropping the pill on the floor and grinding it under my heel. She watched my action dumbly. Quietly I went to the medicine chest and shook restorative powder into the water she'd drawn.

She drank it off, then sat down again wearily.

"Listen, Valcine," I said seriously, taking her limp hand, "if we once get out of this jam there are hospitals on Earth fully equipped to deal with your problem. You can be cured, and though in honor bound I shall be forced to hand you over to the law, I have no doubt of the verdict. A victim of olvis-root poisoning isn't responsible to anybody or anything. It is Casper—and he alone—who'll take the rap. Understand?"

"I'm answerable to my conscience," she said bitterly. "The unspeakable things I have done. Nothing can eradicate the penalty due me for that." She stopped and winced with transient pain, then said, "I—I must rest awhile."

With that she coiled herself up on the single bunk by the wall and was soon asleep. Finally, after a long study of her beautiful features in repose I cursed and damned Casper until I could curse no more. Then I lowered the air pressure and lay down on the floor to doze.

I awakened again to find Valcine shaking me.

"We must get busy again," she said urgently. "The air is getting so much weaker!"

I nodded and scrambled up, studied her quickly. She looked wan, her eyes dead with weariness even though she had slept. We had a small meal then got into our spacesuits once more and recharged the air cylinders. This revived us a little and we set out on our task again. We kept at it until fatigue got us down again, but our cutters had done good work. I almost dared to hope that we could cut things short by a sudden forward impetus which might smash the remaining barrier and drive us right out into space.

I told this to Valcine when we got back into the ship. She turned from studying the air gauge.

"We shall have to do so," she said seriously. "Our air will only last that

long anyway. Don't forget that in getting away from Jupiter we shall draw enormously on the air because of the strain on our lungs with the acceleration. We've barely enough to get away with."

I went to her side and looked at the ominous needle. Barely enough was right.

"Of course," I said, thinking, "there is another way. By this time the space patrol will have picked up Casper. Suppose I were to stay behind in the cavern outside here, protected by a spacesuit? I'd have the air cylinder. You could go ahead and tell the S.P. Then recharge the globe with air and come back for me. You'd have ample air to make that journey from here alone."

"Walk right into the lion's jaws, eh?" she asked somberly.

"Only as a means to your final escape from your beastly other self. Only as a means to absolute cure."

She smiled faintly. "Cure? I wonder. I feel burned out. Dead. I doubt if I'd ever live long enough to reach a hospital anyway. Besides, how do you know I'd ever come back for you?"

"I just . . . know," I said.

Her eyes looked into mine, reflecting something of what I was thinking. But at last she shook her head slowly.

"No—I can't go to the S.P. and tell them to return here. I can't even face them. I've my conscience to reckon with. There is a better way. *You* go alone and *I'll* stay behind in a spacesuit. You can arrange the details for the S.P. to come and take me."

"I won't do it," I said firmly.

"If you love me, Stanley—you will."

It was the first time she had ever used what she thought was my Christian name and it made me stare at her for the moment. Then almost before I had realized it I was covering her face with kisses and telling her my real name was Curtis Stanley.

"And Val, I *do* love you," I whispered.

"Then, Curt, do as I say, please! Every minute is precious. It's the only way I can feel easy in my mind. For you to explain things away a bit about me first to the S.P. If I know you're coming

back I'll last out, until we get to a hospital."

Then she had turned quickly and was clambering into her space suit. Before she put on the helmet she gave a long, lingering gaze with wistful eyes. Then her helmet snapped in place and she climbed out through the airlock.

I WATCHED through the port until she was at a safe distance, then clamping the airlock I moved to the control board. Carefully, I let in the power switches. The globe started vibrating on the ice. Ahead of me was the brief tunnel with its rearing wall, into which I might easily smash to destruction. And behind was—

It was Valcine! She was running back toward the globe just as it started to move down the slope. What the devil was she doing? The flaring of the rocket exhaust might quite easily melt the ice columns and bring down tons of ice and rock upon her.

It was too late now to stop. The globe was hurtling for the barrier. I wasn't even looking at it. I could see Valcine had stopped now and was waving.

Then in a tumult of endless thunders the thing happened. Ice, rocks, mineral ores—the whole lot crumbled in behind the fast moving globe and blotted her out of sight in chaos. At the same moment I was hurled back in my chair as I smashed right through the ice wall and went soaring away against the merciless Jovian pull, battling with the tempest.

Up and up. I hardly realized what I was doing. As I plowed through ammonia fog with laboring heart I pieced together odd bits. I remembered Valcine's reference to her conscience. I remembered too that she had deliberately walked back into the danger area in the ice-hole—

Air enough for one—and she had wished it to be me!

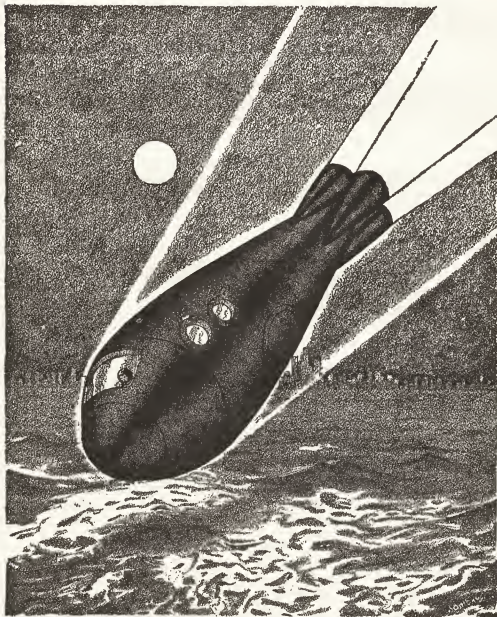
Dully I stared in front of me. To the end of my days I shall remember a lone figure—an infinitely courageous figure—waving a last good-by before the obliterating thunder of an avalanche.

PRISON PLANET

By BOB TUCKER

To remain on Mars meant death from agonizing space-sickness, but Earth-surgery lay days of flight away. And there was only a surface rocket in which to escape—with a traitorous Ganymedian for its pilot.

Illustrated by Knight



The ocean rushed up with incredible speed.

LISTEN, Rat!" Roberds said, "what *I* say goes around here. It doesn't happen to be any of your business. I'm still in possession of my wits, and I know Peterson can't handle that ship. Furthermore Gladney will be in it too, right along side of that sick girl in there! And Rat, get this: *I'm* going to

pilot that ship. Understand? Consulate or no Consulate, job or no job, I'm wheeling that crate to Earth because this is an emergency. And the emergency happens to be bigger than my position, to me at any rate." His tone dropped to a deadly softness. "Now will you kindly remove your stinking carcass from this office?"

Unheeding, Rat swung his eyes around in the gloom and discovered the woman, a nurse in uniform. He blinked at her and she returned the look, wavering. She bit her lip and determination flowed back. She met the stare of his boring, off-colored eyes. Rat grinned suddenly. Nurse Gray almost smiled back, stopped before the others could see it.

"Won't go!" The Centaurian resumed his fight. "You not go, lose job, black-listed. Never get another. Look at me. I know." He retreated a precious step to escape a rolled up fist. "Little ship carry four nice. Rip out lockers and bunks. Swing hammocks. Put fuel in water tanks. Live on concentrates. Earth hospital fix bellyache afterwards, allright. I pilot ship. Yes?"

"No!" Roberds screamed.

Almost in answer, a moan issued from a small side room. The men in the office froze as Nurse Gray ran across the room. She disappeared through the narrow door.

"Peterson," the field manager ordered, "come over here and help me throw this rat out . . ." He went for Rat. Peterson swung up out of his chair with balled fist. The outlander backed rapidly.

"No need, no need, no need!" he said quickly. "I go." Still backing, he blindly kicked at the door and stepped into the night.

WHEN the door slammed shut Roberds locked it. Peterson slumped in the chair.

"Do you mean that, Chief? About taking the ship yourself?"

"True enough." Roberds cast an anxious glance at the partly closed door, lowered his voice. "It'll cost me my job, but that girl in there has to be taken to a hospital quickly! And it's her luck to be landed on a planet that doesn't boast even one! So it's Earth . . . or she dies. I'd feel a lot better too if we could get Gladney to a hospital, I'm not too confi-

dent of that patching job." He pulled a pipe from a jacket pocket. "So, might as well kill two birds with one stone . . . and that wasn't meant to be funny!"

Peterson said nothing, sat watching the door.

"Rat has the right idea," Roberds continued, "but I had already thought of it. About the bunks and lockers. Greaseball has been out there all night tearing them out. We just *might* be able to hop by dawn . . . and hell of a long, grinding hop it will be!"

The nurse came out of the door.

"How is she?" Roberds asked.

"Sleeping," Gray whispered. "But sinking . . ."

"We can take off at dawn, I think."

He filled the pipe and didn't look at her. "You'll have to spend most of the trip in a hammock."

"I can take it." Suddenly she smiled, wanly. "I was with the Fleet. How long will it take?"

"Eight days, in *that* ship."

Roberds lit his pipe, and carefully hid his emotions. He knew Peterson was harboring the same thoughts. Eight days in space, in a small ship meant for two, and built for planetary surface flights. Eight days in that untrustworthy crate, hurtling to save the lives of that girl and Gladney.

"Who was that . . . man? The one you put out?" Gray asked.

"We call him Rat," Roberds said.

She didn't ask why. She said: "Why couldn't he pilot the ship, I mean? What is his record?"

Peterson opened his mouth.

"Shut up, Peterson!" the Chief snapped. "We don't talk about his record around here, Miss Gray. It's not a pretty thing to tell."

"Stow it, Chief," said Peterson. "Miss Gray is no pantywaist." He turned to the nurse. "Ever hear of the Sansan massacre?"

Patti Gray paled. "Yes," she whispered. "Was Rat in that?"

Roberds shook his head. "He didn't take part in it. But Rat was attached to a very important office at the time, the outpost watch. And when Mad Barry Sansan and his gang of thugs swooped down on the Ganymedean colony, there

was no warning. Our friend Rat was AWOL.

"As to who he is . . . well, just one of those freaks from up around Centauria somewhere. He's been hanging around all the fields and dumps on Mars a long time, finally landed up here."

"But," protested Miss Gray, "I don't understand? I always thought that leaving one's post under such circumstances meant execution."

The Chief Consul nodded. "It does, usually. But this was a freak case. It would take hours to explain. However, I'll just sum it up in one word: politics. Politics, with which Rat had no connection saved him."

The girl shook her head, more in sympathy than condemnation.

"Are you expecting the others in soon?" she asked. "It wouldn't be right to leave Peterson."

"They will be in, in a day or two. Peterson will beat it over to Base station for repairs, and to notify Earth we're coming. He'll be all right."

Abruptly she stood up. "Goodnight gentlemen. Call me if I'm needed."

Roberds nodded acknowledgement. The door to the side room closed behind her. Peterson hauled his chair over to the desk. He sniffed the air.

"Damned rat!" he whispered harshly. "They ought to make a law forcing him to wear dark glasses!"

Roberds smiled wearily. "His eyes do get a man, don't they?"

"I'd like to burn 'em out!" Peterson snarled.

RAT helped Greaseball fill the water tanks to capacity with fuel, checked the concentrated rations and grunted.

Greaseball looked over the interior and chuckled. "The boss said strip her, and strip her I did. All right, Rat, outside." He followed the Centaurian out, and pulled the ladder away from the lip of the lock. The two walked across the strip of sandy soil to the office building. On tiptoes, Greaseball poked his head through the door panel. "All set."

Roberds nodded at him. "Stick with it!" and jerked a thumb at Rat outside. Grease nodded understanding.

"Okay, Rat, you can go to bed now."

He dropped the ladder against the wall and sat on it. "Good night." He watched Rat walk slowly away.

Swinging down the path towards his own rambling shack, Rat caught a sibilant whisper. Pausing, undecided, he heard it again.

"Here . . . can you see me?" A white clad arm waved in the gloom. Rat regarded the arm in the window. Another impatient gesture, and he stepped to the sill.

"Yes?"—in the softest of whispers. The voices of the men in droning conversation drifted in. "What you want?"

Nothing but silence for a few hanging seconds, and then: "Can you pilot that ship?" Her voice was shaky.

He didn't answer, stared at her confused. He felt her fear as clearly as he detected it in her words.

"Well, *can* you?" she demanded.

"Damn yes!" he stated simply. "It now necessary?"

"Very! She is becoming worse. I'm afraid to wait until daylight. And . . . well, we want *you* to pilot it! She refuses to risk Mr. Roberds' job. She favors you."

Rat stepped back, astonished. "She?"

Nurse Gray moved from the window and Rat saw the second form in the room, a slight, quiet figure on a small cot. "My patient," Nurse Gray explained. "She overheard our conversation awhile ago. Quick, please, can you?"

Rat looked at her and then at the girl on the cot. He vanished from the window. Almost immediately, he was back again.

"When?" he whispered.

"As soon as possible. Yes. Do you know . . .?" but he had gone again. Nurse Gray found herself addressing blackness. On the point of turning, she saw him back again.

"Blankets," he instructed. "Wrap in blankets. Cold—hot too. Wrap good!" And he was gone again. Gray blinked away the illusion he disappeared upwards.

She ran over to the girl. "Judith, if you want to back down, now is the time. He'll be back in a moment."

"No!" Judith moaned. "No!" Gray smiled in the darkness and began wrap-

ping the blankets around her. A light tapping at the window announced the return of Rat. The nurse pushed open the window wide, saw him out there with arms upstretched.

"Grit your teeth and hold on! Here we go." She picked up the blanketed girl in both arms and walked to the window. Rat took the girl easily as she was swung out, the blackness hid them both. But he appeared again instantly.

"Better lock window," he cautioned. "Stall, if Boss call. Back soon . . ." and he was gone.

To Nurse Gray the fifteen minute wait seemed like hours, impatient agonizing hours of tight-lipped anxiety.

FEET first, she swung through the window, clutching a small bag in her hands. She never touched ground. Rat whispered "Hold tight!" in her ear and the wind was abruptly yanked from her! The ground fell away in a dizzy rush, unseen but felt, in the night! Her feet scraped on some projection, and she felt herself being lifted still higher. Wind returned to her throat, and she breathed again.

"I'm sorry," she managed to get out, gaspingly. "I wasn't expecting that. I had forgotten you—"

"—had wings," he finished and chuckled. "So likewise Greaseball." The pale office lights dropped away as they sped over the field. On the far horizon, a tinge of dawn crept along the uneven terrain.

"Oh, the bag!" she gasped. "I've dropped it."

He chuckled again. "Have got. You scare, I catch."

She didn't see the ship because of the wind in her eyes, but without warning she plummeted down and her feet jarred on the lip of the lock. "Inside. No noise, no light. Easy." But in spite of his warning she tripped in the darkness. He helped her from the floor and guided her to the hammocks.

"Judith?" she asked.

"Here. Beside you, trussed up so tight I can hardly breathe."

"No talk!" Rat insisted. "Much hush-hush needed. Other girl shipshape. You make likewise." Forcibly he shoved her

into a hammock. "Wrap up tight. Straps tight. When we go, we go fast. Bang!" And he left her.

"Hey! Where are you going now?"

"To get Gladney. He sick too. Hush hush!" His voice floated back.

"Where has he gone?" Judith called.

"Back for another man. Remember the two miners who found us when we crashed? The burly one fell off a rock-bank as they were bringing us in. Stove in his ribs pretty badly. The other has a broken arm . . . happened once while you were out. They wouldn't let me say anything for fear of worrying you."

THE girl did not answer then and a hushed expectancy fell over the ship. Somewhere aft a small motor was running. Wind whistled past the open lock.

"I've caused plenty of trouble haven't I?" she asked aloud, finally. "This was certainly a fool stunt, and I'm guilty of a lot of fool stunts! I just didn't realize until now the *why* of that law."

"Don't talk so much," the nurse admonished. "A lot of people have found out the *why* of that law the hard way, just as you are doing, and lived to remember it. Until hospitals are built on this forlorn world, humans like you who haven't been properly conditioned will have to stay right at home."

"How about these men that live and work here?"

"They never get here until they've been through the mill first. Adenoids, appendix', all the extra parts they can get along without."

"Well," Judith said. "I've certainly learned my lesson!"

Gray didn't answer, but from out of the darkness surrounding her came a sound remarkably resembling a snort.

"Gray?" Judith asked fearfully.

"Yes?"

"Hasn't the pilot been gone an awfully long time?"

Rat himself provided the answer by alighting at the lip with a jar that shook the ship. He was breathing heavily and lugging something in his arms. The burden groaned.

"Gladney!" Nurse Gray exclaimed.

"I got." Rat confirmed. "Yes, Gladney. Damn heavy, Gladney."

"But how?" she demanded. "What of Roberds and Peterson?"

"Trick," he sniggered. "I burn down my shack. Boss run out. I run in. Very simple." He packed Gladney into the remaining hammock and snapped buckles.

"And Peterson?" she prompted.

"Oh yes. Peterson. So sorry about Peterson. Had to fan him."

"Fan him? I don't understand."

"Fan. With chair. Everything all right. I apologized." Rat finished up and was walking back to the lock. They heard a slight rustling of wings as he padded away.

He was back instantly, duplicating his feat of a short time ago. Cursing shouts were slung on the night air, and the deadly spang of bullets bounced on the hull! Some entered the lock. The Centaurian snapped it shut. Chunks of lead continued to pound the ship. Rat leaped for the pilot's chair, heavily, a wing drooping.

"You've been hurt!" Gray cried. A small panel light outlined his features. She tried to struggle up.

"Lie still! We go. Boss get wise." With lightning fingers he flicked several switches on the panel, turned to her. "Hold belly. Zoom!"

Gray folded her hands across her stomach and closed her eyes.

Rat unlocked the master level and shoved!

"**W**HEW!" Nurse Gray came back to throbbing awareness, the all too familiar feeling of a misplaced stomach attempting to force its crowded way into her boots plaguing her. Rockets roared in the rear. She loosened a few straps and twisted over. Judith was still out, her face tensed in pain. Gray bit her lip and twisted the other way. The Centaurian was grinning at her.

"Do you always leave in a hurry?" she demanded, and instantly wished she hadn't said it. He gave no outward sign.

"Long-time sleep," he announced. "Four, five hours maybe." The chest strap was lying loose at his side.

"That long!" she was incredulous. "I'm never out more than three hours!"

Unloosening more straps, she sat up, glanced at the control panel.

"Not taking time," he stated simply and pointed to a dial. Gray shook her head and looked at the others.

"That isn't doing either of them any good!"

Rat nodded unhappily. "What's her matter—?" pointing.

"Appendix. Something about this atmosphere sends it haywire. The thing itself isn't diseased, but it starts manufacturing poison. Patient dies in a week unless it is taken out."

"Don't know it," he said briefly.

"Do you mean to say you don't have an appendix?" she demanded.

Rat folded his arms and considered this. "Don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no. Where's it hurt?"

Gray pointed out the location. The Centaurian considered this further and drifted into long contemplation. Watching him, Gray remembered his eyes that night . . . only *last* night . . . in the office. Peterson had refused to meet them. After awhile Rat came out of it.

"No," he waved. "No appendix. Never nowhere appendix."

"Then Mother Nature has finally woke up!" she exclaimed. "But why do Centaurians rate it exclusively?"

Rat ignored this and asked one of her. "What you and her doing up there?" He pointed back and up, to where Mars obliterated the stars.

"You might call it a pleasure jaunt. She's only seventeen. We came over in a cruiser belonging to her father; it was rather large and easy to handle. But the cruise ended when she lost control of the ship because of an attack of space-appendicitis. The rest you know."

"So you?"

"So I'm a combination nurse, governess, guard and what have you. Or will be until we get back. After this, I'll probably be looking for work." She shivered.

"Cold?" he inquired concernedly.

"On the contrary, I'm too warm." She started to remove the blanket. Rat threw up a hand to stop her.

"Leave on! Hot out here."

"But I'm too hot now. I want to take it off!"

"No. Leave on. Wool blanket. Keep in body heat, yes. Keep out cold, yes. Keep in, keep out, likewise. See?"

Gray stared at him. "I never thought of it that way before. Why of course! If it protects from one temperature, it will protect from another. Isn't it silly of me not to know that?" Heat pressing on her face accented the fact.

"What is your name?" she asked. "Your real one I mean."

He grinned. "Big. You couldn't say it. Sound like Christmas and bottlenose together real fast. Just say Rat. Everybody does." His eyes swept the panel and flashed back to her. "Your name Gray. Have a front name?"

"Patti."

"Pretty, Patti."

"No, just Patti. Say, what's the matter with the cooling system?"

"Damn punk," he said. "This crate for surface work. No space. Cooling system groan, damn punk. Won't keep cool here."

"And . . ." she followed up, "it will get warmer as we go out?"

Rat turned back to his board in a brown study and carefully ignored her. Gray grasped an inkling of what the coming week could bring.

"But how about water?" she demanded next. "Is there enough?"

He faced about. "For her—" nodding to Judith, "and him—" to Gladney, "yes. Sparingly. Four hours every time, maybe." Back to Gray. "You, me . . . twice a day. Too bad." His eyes drifted aft to the tank of water. She followed. "One tank water. All the rest fuel. Too bad, too bad. We get thirsty I think."

THEY did get thirsty, soon. A damn-able hot thirst accented by the knowledge that water was precious, a thirst increased by a dried-up-in-the-mouth sensation. Their first drink was strangely bitter; tragically disappointing. Patti Gray suddenly swung upright in the hammock and kicked her legs. She massaged her throat with a nervous hand, wiped damp hair from about her face.

"I have to have a drink."

Rat stared at her without answer.

"I said, I have to have a drink!"

"Heard you."

"Well . . .?"

"Well, nothing. Stall. Keep water longer."

She swung a vicious boot and missed by inches. Rat grinned, and made his way aft, hand over hand. He treaded cautiously along the deck. "Do like this," he called over his shoulder. "Gravity punk too. Back and under, gravity." He waited until she joined him at the water tap.

They stood there glaring idiotically at each other.

She burst out laughing. "They even threw the drinking cups out!" Rat inched the handle grudgingly and she applied lips to the faucet.

"Faugh!" Gray sprang back, forgot herself and lost her balance, sat down on the deck and spat out the water. "It's hot! It tastes like hell and it's hot! It must be fuel!"

Rat applied his lips to the tap and sampled. Coming up with a mouthful he swished it around on his tongue like mouthwash. Abruptly he contrived a facial contortion between a grin and a grimace, and let some of the water trickle from the edges of his mouth. He swallowed and it cost him something.

"No. I mean yes, I think. Water, no doubt. Yes. Fuel out, water in. Swish-swush. Dammit, Greaseball forget to wash tank!"

"But what makes it so hot?" She worked her mouth to dry-rinse the taste of the fuel.

"Ship get hot. Water on sun side. H-m-m-m-m-m-m."

"H-m-m-m-m-m-m-m what?"

"Flip-flop." He could talk with his hands as well. "Hot side over like pancake." Rat hobbled over to the board and sat down. An experimental flick on a lever produced nothing. Another flick, this time followed by a quivering jar. He contemplated the panel board while fastening his belt.

"H-m-m-m-m-m-m," the lower lip protruded.

Gray protested. "Oh, stop humming and do something! That wa—" the word was queerly torn from her throat, and a scream magically filled the vacancy. Nurse Gray sat up and rubbed a painful spot that had suddenly appeared on her arm.

She found her nose bleeding and another new, swelling bruise on the side of her head. Around her the place was empty. Bare.

No, not quite. A wispy something was hanging just out of sight in the corner of the eye; the water tap was now moulded *upward*, beads glistening on its handle. The wispy thing caught her attention again and she looked up.

Two people, tightly wrapped and bound in hammocks, were staring down at her, amazed, swinging on their stomachs. Craning further, she saw Rat. He was hanging upside down in the chair, grinning at her in reverse.

"Flip-flop," he laconically explained.

"For cripes sakes, Jehosaphat!" Gladney groaned. "Turn me over on my back! Do something!" Gray stood on tiptoes and just could pivot the hammocks on their rope-axis.

"And now, please, just *how* do I get into mine?" she bit at Rat.

EXISTENCE dragged. Paradoxically, time dropped away like a cloak as the sense of individual hours and minutes vanished, and into its place crept a slow-torturing substitute. As the ship revolved, monotonously, first the ceiling and then the floor took on dullish, maddening aspects, eyes ached continuously from staring at them time and again without surcease. The steady, drumming rockets crashed into the mind and the walls shrieked malevolently on the eyeballs. Dull, throbbing sameness of the poorly filtered air, a growing taint in the nostrils. Damp warm skin, reeking blankets. The taste of fuel in the mouth for refreshment. Slowly mounting mental duress. And above all the drumming of the rockets.

Once, a sudden, frightening change of pitch in the rockets and a wild, sickening lurch. Meteor rain. Maddening, plunging swings to the far right and left, made without warning. A torn lip as a sudden lurch tears the faucet from her mouth. A shattered tooth.

"Sorry!" Rat whispered.

"Shut up and drive!" she cried.

"Patti . . ." Judith called out, in pain.

Peace of mind followed peace of body into a forgotten limbo of lost things, a

slyly climbing madness directed at one another. Waspish words uttered in pain, fatigue and temper. Fractiousness. A hot, confined, stale hell. Sleep became a hollow mockery, as bad water and concentrated tablets brought on stomach pains to plague them. Consciousness punctured only by spasms of lethargy, shared to some extent by the invalids. Above all, crawling lassitude and incalescent tempers.

Rat watched the white, drawn face swing in the hammock beside him. And his hands never faltered on the controls.

Never a slackening of the terrific pace; abnormal speed, gruelling drive . . . drive . . . drive. Fear. Tantalizing fear made worse because Rat couldn't understand. Smothered moaning that ate at his nerves. Grim-faced, sleep-wracked, belted to the chair, driving!

"How many days? How many days!" Gray begged of him thousands of times until the very repetition grated on her eardrums. "How many days?" His only answer was an inhuman snarl, and the cruel blazing of those inhuman eyes.

She fell face first to the floor. "I can't keep it up!" she cried. The sound of her voice rolled along the hot steel deck. "I can't! I can't!"

A double handful of tepid water was thrown in her face. "Get up!" Rat stood over her, face twisted, his body hunched. "Get up!" She stared at him, dazed. He kicked her. "Get up!" The tepid water ran off her face and far away she heard Judith calling . . . She forced herself up. Rat was back in the chair.

GLADNEY unexpectedly exploded. He had been awake for a long time, watching Rat at the board. Wrenching loose a chest strap he attempted to sit up.

"Rat! Damn you Rat, listen to me! *When're you going to start braking, Rat?*"

"I hear you." He turned on Gladney with dulled eyes. "Lie down. You sick."

"I'll be damned if I'm going to lie here and let you drive us to Orion! We must be near the half-way line! When are you going to start braking?"

"Not brake," Rat answered sullenly. "No, not brake."

"*Not brake?*" Gladney screamed and sat bolt upright. Nurse Gray jumped for him. "Are you crazy, you skinny rat?"

Gray secured a hold on his shoulders and forced him down. "You gotta brake! Don't you understand that? You have to, you vacuum-skull!" Gray was pleading with him to shut-up like a good fellow. He appealed to her. "He's gotta brake! Make him!"

"He has a good point there, Rat," she spoke up. "What about this half-way line?"

He turned to her with a weary ghost of the old smile on his face. "We passed line. Three days ago, maybe." A shrug of shoulders.

"Passed!" Gray and Gladney exclaimed in unison.

"You catch on quick," Rat nodded. "This six day, don't you know?"

Gladney sank back, exhausted. The nurse crept over to the pilot. "Getting your figures mixed, aren't you?"

Rat shook his head and said nothing.

"But Roberds said eight days, and he—"

"—he on Mars. I here. Boss nuts, too sad. He drive, it be eight days. Now only six." He cast a glance at Judith and found her eyes closed. "Six days, no brake. No."

"I see your point, and appreciate it," Gray cut in. "But now what? This deceleration business . . . there is a whole lot I don't know, but some things I do!"

Rat refused the expected answer. "Land tonight, I think. Never been to Earth before. Somebody meet us, I think."

"You can bet your leather boots somebody will meet us!" Gladney cried. Gray turned to him. "The Chief'll have the whole planet waiting for you!" He laughed with real satisfaction. "Oh yes, Rat, they'll be somebody waiting for us all right." And then he added: "If we land."

"Oh, we land." Rat confided, glad to share a secret.

"Yeah," Gladney grated. "But in how many little pieces?"

"I've never been to Earth before. Nice, I think." Patti Gray caught something new in the tone and stared at him. Gladney must have noticed it, too.

The Centaurian moved sideways and pointed. Gray placed her eyes in the vacated position.

"Earth!" she shouted.

"Quite. Nice. Do me a favor?"

"Just name it!"

"Not drink long time. Some water?"

Gray nodded and went to the faucet. The drumming seemed remote, the tension vanished. She was an uncommonly long time in returning, at last she appeared beside him, outstretched hands dry.

"There isn't any left, Rat.

Rat batted his tired eyes expressively. "Tasted punk," he grinned at her.

She sat down on the floor suddenly and buried her face.

"Rat," she said presently, "I want to ask you something, rather personal? Your . . . name. 'Rat'? Roberds told me something about your record. But . . . please tell me, Rat. You didn't know the attack was coming, did you?"

He grinned again and wagged his head at her. "No. Who tell Rat?" Suddenly he was deadly serious as he spoke to her. "Rat a.w.o.l., go out to help sick man alone in desert. Rat leave post. Not time send call through. Come back with man, find horrible thing happen."

"But why didn't you explain?"

He grinned again. "Who believe? Sick man die soon after."

Gladney sat up. He had heard the conversation between the two. "You're right, Rat. No one would have believed you then, and no one will now. You've been safe enough on Mars, but the police will nab you as soon as you get out of the ship."

"They can't!" cried Patti Gray. "They can't hurt him after what he's done now."

The Centaurian grinned in a cynical way.

"Police not get me, Gladney. Gladney's memory damn punk, I think. Earth pretty nice place, maybe. But not for Rat."

Gladney stared at him for minutes. Then: "Say, I get it . . . you're—"

"Shut up!" Rat cut him off sharply.

"You talk too much." He cast a glance at Nurse Gray and then threw a meaning look at Gladney.

GLADNEY subsided. Patti Gray noted with dawning wonder that his face had lost the loathing and anger he had previously held toward the outlaw pilot.

"Look. Sea!" Rat said a few moments later. Gray was in her hammock. She twisted over as he moved bony shoulders aside to let her see through the vision port. A startlingly brief glimpse of glistening waters shot past, reflecting a dancing moonpath. A continent whirled into place on the plate. The skies were clear of other craft.

"Travelling fast!" she warned. "I hope you know what you're doing." Another body of water shot past them beneath. "That must be the Pacific. Where are you going to set down?"

"The ocean." Rat didn't turn his attention away from the plate. "Gladney you got bad memory too much. That's why we passed half-way line full speed! Sea water good brake, stop us hundred miles!"

Gladney flopped back. "May I be kicked to death! Of course! I've heard of it being done by stunt pilots. But Rat, are you sure you can do it? I mean, can you land us without killing us all?"

"Oh yes," but Rat was grimly serious. "I can all right, but . . ."

". . . but what?"

"Ever see little boy skipping stones across water?" His hand shot out and described a series of violent ricocheting motions. "Like that? We land that way, I think. *Splat-splat!* First splat knock us all . . . all . . . what you say?"

"Knock us out?" Gladney supplied.

Rat shrugged. Gray caught his eyes.

"Goodnight, Rat," she smiled at him. "When I wake up, I want to see you again. You won't be in jail for awhile, not until the hospital releases you, and perhaps by that time . . ."

"All no bother, please. I liked you Patti Gray. But your memory pretty punk too. Forget your Fleet training, I think. Yes! But Patti . . ." he stopped, helpless.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about something. I kicked you."

"Rat, please forget it. I won't forgive you for there is nothing to forgive you for!" She smiled at him, winked once and closed her eyes. "Goodnight everyone."

They felt the nose dip as Rat dropped toward the moonlit sea. The ocean rushed up. The ship struck with titanic force, blasting through the white-caps, metal crumpling from the monstrous dive. And then all consciousness blacked out for those on board.

PATTI GRAY awoke, pressed the button under her pillow for a nurse, smiled about the clean hospital room.

Gladney was waiting to see her. He wheeled himself in and stopped the chair beside her bed.

"Hello. Feel human again?"

"Do I?" She laughed. "Gladney, I'm going to stay right here the rest of my life!"

"Yeah . . . that's what I said yesterday. But today I'm itching to get back up yonder." He dug a thumb at the sky.

"Is Judith all right?"

"Sure. She wants to see you. Frankly, Miss Gray," he lowered his voice, "I expected that first 'splat' of Rat's would kill her."

Gray shivered. "I have a hazy memory of that landing. How did we do it?"

"Easy. A coast-guard cutter saw us and picked us up about ten miles out."

"Gladney," she said quickly, "you've got to help me clear Rat. We've got to . . . why Gladney, you don't mean they got him . . .?"

"They didn't get him. *Earth* did. Don't you remember what he said about Earth being a nice place for us? Centaurians can't endure Earth's gravity and atmosphere; the Centaurian Embassy is very specially built, and all Centaurians come to Earth in what are virtually fish bowls.

"Rat was beginning to die even as we dove for the water."

Patti Gray stared at him a moment in frozen horror, then buried her face in the pillow.

"Some day, he will be remembered, Miss Gray," Gladney whispered. "Some day, after all the bitterness over Ganymede is forgotten, they'll remember *why* Rat left his post, and they'll remember how he drove."

STELLAR SHOWBOAT

By MALCOLM JAMESON

A drama more fantastic than any the stage had ever produced was being plotted behind the curtains of the Showboat of Space. And between its presentation and inter-world disaster, waiting for his cue, stood only the lone figure of Investigator Neville.

SPECIAL Investigator Billy Neville was annoyed, and for more reasons than one. He had just done a tedious year in the jungles of Venus stamping out the gooroo racket and then, on his way home to a well-deserved leave and rest, had been diverted to Mars for a swift clean-up of the diamond-mine robbery ring. And now, when he again thought he would be free for a while, he found himself shunted to little Pallas, capital of the Asteroid Confederation. But clever, patient Colonel Frawley, commandant of all the Interplanetary Police in the belt, merely smiled indulgently while Neville blew off his steam.

"You say," said Neville, still ruffled, "that there has been a growing wave of blackmail and extortion all over the System, coupled with a dozen or so instances of well-to-do, respectable persons disappearing without a trace. And you say that that has been going on for a couple of years and several hundred of our crack operatives have been working on it, directed by the best brains of the force, and yet haven't got anywhere. And that up to now there have been no such cases develop in the asteroids. Well, what do you want *me* for? What's the emergency?"

The colonel laughed and dropped the ash from his cigar, preparatory to lying back in his chair and taking another long, soothing drag. The office of the Chief Inspector of the A.C. division of the I.P. was not only well equipped for the work it had to do, but for comfort.

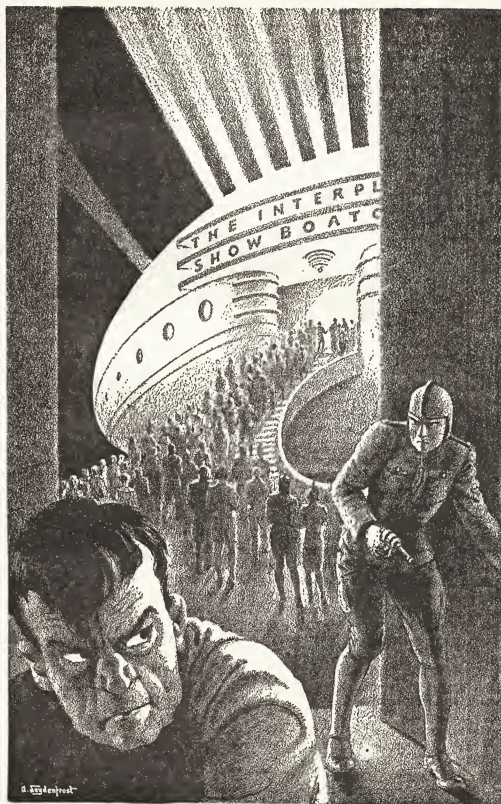
"I am astonished," he remarked, "to hear an experienced policeman indulge in such loose talk. Who said anything about having had the *best* brains on the job? Or that no progress had been made? Or

that there was no emergency? Any bad crime situation is always an emergency, no matter how long it lasts. Which is all the more reason why we have to break it up, and quickly. I tell you, things are becoming very serious. Lifelong partners in business are becoming suspicious and secretive toward each other; husbands and wives are getting jittery and jealous. Nobody knows whom to trust. The most sacred confidences have a way of leaking out. Then they are in the market for the highest bidder. No boy, this thing is a headache. I never had a worse."

"All right, all right," growled Neville, resignedly. "I'm stuck. Shoot! How did it begin, and what do you know?"

THE colonel reached into a drawer and pulled out a fat jacket bulging with papers, photostats, and interdepartmental reports.

"It began," he said, "about two years ago, on Io and Callisto. It spread all over the Jovian System and soured Gany-mede and Europa. The symptoms were first the disappearances of several prominent citizens, followed by a wave of bankruptcies and suicides on both planetoids. Nobody complained to the police. Then a squad of our New York men picked up a petty chiseler who was trying to gouge the Jovian Corporation's Tellurian office out of a large sum of money on the strength of some damaging documents he possessed relating to a hidden scandal in the life of the New York manager. From that lead, they picked up a half-dozen other small fry extortionists and even managed to grab their higher-up—a sort of middleman who specialized in exploiting secret commercial information and



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Illustrated by Leydenfrost

scandalous material about individuals. There the trail stopped. They put him through the mill, but all he would say is that a man approached him with the portfolio, sold him on its value for extortion purposes, and collected in advance. There could be no follow up for the reason that after the first transaction what profits the local gang could make out of the dirty work would be their own."

"Yes," said Neville, "I know the racket. When they handle it that way it's hard to beat. You get any amount of minnows, but the whales get away."

"Right. The disturbing thing about the contents of the portfolio was the immense variety of secrets it contained and that it was evidently prepared by one man. There were, for example, secret industrial formulas evidently stolen for sale to a competitor. The bulk of it was other commercial items, such as secret credit reports, business volume, and the like. But there was a good deal of rather nasty personal stuff, too. It was a gold mine of information for an unscrupulous black-mailer, and every bit of it originated on Callisto. Now, whom do you think, could have been in a position to compile it?"

"The biggest corporation lawyer there, I should guess," said Neville. "Priests and doctors know a lot of personal secrets, but a good lawyer manages to learn most everything."

"Right. Very right. We sent men to Callisto and learned that some months earlier the most prominent lawyer of the place had announced one day he must go over to Io to arrange some contracts. He went to Io, all right, but was never seen again after he stepped out of the ship. It was shortly after, that the wave of Callistan suicides and business failures took place."

"All right," agreed Neville, "so what? It has happened before. Even the big ones go wrong now and then."

"Yes, but wait. That fellow had nothing to go wrong about. He was tremendously successful, rich, happily married, and highly respected for his outstanding integrity. Yet he could hardly have been kidnaped, as there has never been a ransom demand. Nor has there ever been such a demand in any of the other cases similar to it.

"The next case to be partially explained was that of the disappearance of the president of the Jupiter Trust Company at Ionopolis. All the most vital secrets of that bank turned up later in all parts of the civilized system. We nabbed some peddlers, but it was the same story as with the first gang. The facts are all here in this jacket. After a little you can read the whole thing in detail."

"Uh, huh, grunted Neville, "I'm beginning to see. But why *me*, and why at Pallas?"

"Because you've never worked in the asteroids and are not known here to any but the higher officers. Among other secrets this ring has, are a number of police secrets. That is why setting traps for them is so difficult. I haven't told you that one of their victims seems to have been one of us. That was Jack Sarkins, who was district commander at Patroclus. He received an apparently genuine ethergram one day—and it was in our most secret code—telling him to report to Mars at once. He went off, alone, in his police rocket. He never got there. As to Pallas, the reason you are here is because the place so far is clean. Their system is to work a place just once and never come back. They milk it dry the first time and there is no need to. Since we have no luck tracing them after the crime, we are going to try a plant and wait for the crime to come to it. You are the plant."

"I see," said Neville slowly. He was interested, but not enthusiastic. "Some day, somehow, someone is coming here and in some manner force someone to yield up all the local dirt and then arrange his disappearance. My role is to break it up before it happens. Sweet!"

"You have such a way of putting things, Neville," chuckled the colonel, "but you do get the point."

He rose and pushed the heavy folder toward his new aide.

"Bone this the rest of the afternoon. I'll be back."

IT was quite late when Colonel Frawley returned and asked Neville cheerily how he was getting on.

"I have the history," Neville answered, slamming the folder shut, "and a glimmering of what you are shooting at. This

guy Simeon Carstairs, I take it, is the local man you have picked as the most likely prospect for your Master Mind crook to work on?"

"He is. He is perfect bait. He is the sole owner of the Radiation Extraction Company which has a secret process that Tellurian Radiant Corporation has made a standing offer of five millions for. He controls the local bank and often sits as magistrate. In addition, he has substantial interests in Vesta and Juno industries. He probably knows more about the asteroids and the people on them than any other living man. Moreover, his present wife is a woman with an unhappy past and who happens also to be related to an extremely wealthy Argentine family. Any ring of extortionists who could worm old Simeon's secrets out of him could write their own ticket."

"So I am to be a sort of private shadow."

"Not a bit of it. I am his bodyguard. We are close friends and lately I have made it a rule to be with him part of the time every day. No, your role is that of observer from the sidelines. I shall introduce you as the traveling representative of the London uniform house that has the police contract. That will explain your presence here and your occasional calls at headquarters. You might sell a few suits of clothes on the side, or at least solicit them. Work that out for yourself."

Neville grimaced. He was not fond of plainclothes work.

"But come, fellow. You've worked hard enough for one day. Go up to my room and get into cits. Then I'll take you over to the town and introduce you around. After that we'll go to a show. The showboat landed about an hour ago."

"Showboat? What the hell is a showboat?"

"I forget," said the colonel, "that your work has been mostly on the heavy planets where they have plenty of good playhouses in the cities. Out here among these little rocks the diversions are brought around periodically and peddled for the night. The showboat, my boy, is a floating theater—a space ship with a stage and an auditorium in it, a troupe of good actors and a cracking fine chorus. This one has been

making the rounds quite a while, though it never stopped here before until last year. They say the show this year is even better. It is the "Lunar Follies of 2326," featuring a chorus of two hundred androids and with Lilly Fitzpatrick and Lionel Dustan in the lead. Tonight, for a change, you can relax and enjoy yourself. We can get down to brass tacks tomorrow."

"Thanks, chief," said Neville, grinning from ear to ear. The description of the showboat was music to his ears, for it had been a long time since he had seen a good comedy and he felt the need of relief from his sordid workaday life.

"When you're in your makeup," the colonel added, "come on down and I'll take you over in my copter."

IT did not take Billy Neville long to make his transformation to the personality of a clothing drummer. Every special cop had to be an expert at the art of quick shifts of disguise and Neville was rather better than most. Nor did it take long for the little blue copter to whisk them halfway around the knobby little planetoid of Pallas. It eased itself through an airlock into a doomed town, and there the colonel left it with his orderly.

The town itself possessed little interest for Neville though his trained photographic eye missed few of its details. It was much like the smaller doomed settlements on the Moon. He was more interested in meeting the local magnate, whom they found in his office in the Carstairs Building. The colonel made the introductions, during which Neville sized up the man. He was of fair height, stockily built, and had remarkably frank and friendly eyes for a self-made man of the asteroids. Not that there was not a certain hardness about him and a considerable degree of shrewdness, but he lacked the cynical cunning so often displayed by the pioneers of the outer system. Neville noted other details as well—the beginning of a set of triple chins, a little brown mole with three hairs on it alongside his nose, and the way a stray lock of hair kept falling over his left eye.

"Let's go," said the colonel, as soon as the formalities were over.

Neville had to borrow a breathing hel-

met from Mr Carstairs, for he had not one of his own and they had to walk from the far portal of the dome across the field to where the showboat lay parked. He thought wryly, as he put it on, that he went from one extreme to another—from Venus, where the air was over-moist, heavy and oppressive from its stagnation, to windy, blustery Mars, and then here, where there was no air at all.

As they approached the grounded ship they saw it was all lit up and throngs of people were approaching from all sides. Flood lamps threw great letters on the side of the silvery hull reading, "Greatest Show of the Void—Come One, Come All—Your Money Back if Not Absolutely Satisfied." They went ahead of the queue, thanks to the prestige of the colonel and the local tycoon, and were instantly admitted. It took but a moment to check their breathers at the helmet room and then the ushers had them in tow.

"See you after the show, Mr. Allington," said the colonel to Neville, "I will be in Mr. Carstairs box."

NEVILLE sank into a seat and watched them go. Then he began to take stock of the playhouse. The seats were comfortable and commodious, evidently having been designed to hold patrons clad in heavy-dust space-suits. The auditorium was almost circular, one semi-circle being taken up by the stage, the other by the tiers of seats. Overhead ranged a row of boxes jutting out above the spectators below. Neville puzzled for a long time over the curtain that shut off the stage. It seemed very unreal, like the shimmer of the aurora, but it affected vision to the extent that the beholder could not say with any certainty *what* was behind it. It was like looking through a waterfall. Then there was eerie music, too, from an unseen source, flooding the air with queer melodies. People continued to pour in. The house gradually darkened and as it did the volume and wildness of the music rose. Then there was a deep bong, and lights went completely out for a full second. The show was on.

Neville sat back and enjoyed it. He could not have done otherwise, for the sign on the hull had not been an empty

plug. It was the best show in the void—or anywhere else, for that matter. A spectral voice that seemed to come from everywhere in the house announced the first number—The Dance of the Woodsprites of Venus. Instantly little flickers of light appeared throughout the house—a mass of vari-colored fireflies blinking off and on and swirling in dizzy spirals. They steadied and grew, coalesced into blobs of living fire—ruby, dazzling green, ethereal blue and yellow. They swelled and shrank, took on human forms only to abandon them; purple serpentine figures writhed among them, paling to silvery smoke and then expiring as a shower of violet sparks. And throughout was the steady, maddening rhythm of the dance tune, unutterably savage and haunting—a folk dance of the hill tribes of Venus. At last, when the sheer beauty of it began to lull the viewers into a hypnotic trance, there came the shrill blare of massed trumpets and the throb of mighty tomtoms culminating in an ear-shattering discord that broke the spell.

The lights were on. The stage was bare. Neville sat up straighter and looked, blinking. It was as if he were in an abandoned warehouse. And then the scenery began to grow. Yes, grow. Almost imperceptible it was, at first, then more distinct. Nebulous bodies appeared, wisps of smoke. They wavered, took on shape, took on color, took on the appearance of solidity. The scent began to have meaning. Part of the background was a gray cliff undercut with a yawning cave. It was a scene from the Moon, a hangout of the cliffdwellers, those refugees from civilization who chose to live the wild life of the undomed Moon rather than submit to the demands of a more ordered life.

Characters came on. There was a little drama, well conceived and well acted. When it was over, the scene vanished as it had come. A comedy team came out next and this time the appropriate scenery materialized at once as one of them stumbled over an imaginary log and fell on his face. The log was not there when he tripped, but it was there by the time his nose hit the stage, neatly turning the joke on his companion who had started to laugh at his unreasonable fall.

On the show went, one scene swiftly

succeeding the next. A song that took the fancy of the crowd was a plaintive ballad. It ran:

*They tell me you did not treat me right,
Nor are grateful for all I've done.
I fear you're fickle as a meteorite
Though my love's constant as the Sun.*

There was a ballet in which a witch rode a comet up into the sky, only to turn suddenly into a housewife and sweep all the cobwebs away. The featured stars came on with the chorus, and Lilly Fitzpatrick sang the big hit song, "You're a Big, Bad Nova to Burn Me Up This Way!" Then a novelty quartet appeared, to play on the curious Callistan *bourdelangs*, those reeds of that planet that grow in bundles. When dried and cut properly, they make multiple-barreled flutes with a tonal quality that makes the senses quiver. The show closed with a grand finale and flooded the house with the Nova song.

It was over. The stage was bare and the shimmering curtain that was not a curtain was back in place. People began to rise and stream into the aisles.

"**L**A-DEEZ and gen-tul-men!" The voice boomed out and people stopped where they stood. A man in evening clothes had stepped through the curtain and was calling for attention.

"You have seen our regular performance. We hope it has pleased you and you will come again next year. But if you will kindly remain in your seats, the ushers will pass around with tickets for the after-show. We have prepared for your especial delectation a little farce entitled, 'It Happens on Pallas.' Now, ladeez and gen'men, I assure you that this sketch was prepared solely for your entertainment and any resemblance of any character in it to any real person is purely coincidental. It is all in fun, and no offense intended. I thank you."

Billy Neville was bolt upright in his seat by then and his eyes glinted hard through narrow slits. Something had rung the bell in his memory, but he did not know what. He would have sworn he had never seen that announcer before, and yet. . . .

The man stepped backward into the curtain and appeared to vanish. The audience were grinning widely and resuming their seats.

"This is going to be good," said the man next to him as he dug for the required fee. "It is their specialty. It beats the regular show, I think."

Neville paid the usher, too, and sat where he was. He shot a glance upward at the box and saw Mr. Carstairs and the colonel in animated conversation and apparently having a grand time. Presently the ushers had done their work. The hall began to darken and the scenery come up. The scene was the main street of New Athens, as some called Pallas' principal town. Neville relaxed and forgot his recent sudden tension for a moment.

But it was only for a moment. For an instant later he was sitting up straight again, watching the development of the act with cold intentness. For the two main characters were comedy parodies of Mr. Carstairs and Colonel Frawley. At first glance they *were* Mr. Carstairs and the colonel, but a second look showed it was only an impression. The police inspector's strutting walk was overdone, as were his other mannerisms, and the same was true of the magnate's character. Their makeup was also exaggerated, Mr. Carstairs' mole being much enlarged and a great deal made of his plumpness. Yet the takeoff was deliciously funny and the audience rolled with laughter. Neville stole another look upward and could make out that both the subjects of the sketch were grinning broadly.

It was a silly, frothy skit about a dog, a lost dog. It seems that Mr. Carstairs had a dog and it strayed. He asked the police to help him find it and they helped. The inspector brought out the whole force. It was excruciatingly funny, and Neville roared at times along with the rest, though there were many local references that he did not understand, nor did he know some of the minor characters were so splittingly entertaining. The man next to him writhed in spasms of delight and almost strangled at one episode.

"Oh, dear," he managed to gasp, "what a scream . . . ho, ho, ho, ho, . . . gup! It happened . . . just like that . . . he *did* lose a dog and all the cops on Pallas

couldn't find it . . . oh me, oh my . . ." Peals of laughter drowned out the rest.

The postlude came to its merry end. This time, the show was over for keeps and the audience began trooping out. Neville got up and looked around for his friend, but the box was empty. So he strolled down the aisle and had a closer look at the illusion of a curtain. He understood some of the effects achieved that night, but the curtain was a new one to him. After standing there a moment he discovered that he could hear voices through it. One was Colonel Frawley's. He was saying:

"Certainly I am not offended. I enjoyed it. I would like to meet the man and congratulate him on the takeoff."

Neville climbed up onto the stage and walked boldly through the curtain. There was a brief tingly feeling, and then he was backstage. Most of the actors had gone to their dressing rooms, but several stood about chatting with the colonel and Mr. Carstairs.

At that moment the man who had made the announcement came on the stage and spoke to Colonel Frawley.

"I dislike interrupting you, Inspector," he said obsequiously, "but one of our patrons is making trouble in the wash-room. She claims her pocket was picked. Would you come?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the colonel. "I stationed an operative there to prevent that very thing. No doubt it is a mistake. However, I'll do what I can."

He excused himself and hurried off. Then the man in black turned to Neville and said in an icy voice, "And you, sir—what is it you wish?"

NEVILLE'S mind worked instantly. He did not want to express interest in Mr. Carstairs, nor did he care to reveal to the showman his acquaintance with the colonel. So he said quickly:

"The curtain . . . I was curious as to how it worked . . . you see, once I . . ."

"Joe," called the man, wheeling, "explain the curtain to the gentleman."

Joe came. He led the way to the switchboard and began a spiel about its intricacies. Neville looked on, understanding it only in the high spots, for the board was a jumble of gadgets and doodads, and it

was not long before he began to suspect that the long-winded explanation was a unique variety of double-talk.

"See?" finished the man, "it's as simple as that. Clever, eh?"

"Yes, indeed. Thanks."

Neville started back to the stage, but the announcer barred his way.

"The exit is right behind you, sir," he said in a chilly voice. The words and intonation were polite, but the voice had that iron-hand-in-velvet-glove quality used by tough bouncers in night clubs when handling obstreperous members of the idle rich. They were accompanied as well by a glance so uncanny and so charged with malignancy that Neville was hard put to keep on looking him in the eye and murmur another "Thank you."

But before Neville reached the exit, Colonel Frawley came through.

"Oh, hello. Where is Carstairs?"

Neville shook his head.

"A moment ago he was talking with his impersonator," offered the announcer, seeming to lose all interest in Neville's departure. "I'll see if he is still here. He may have gone into the actor's dressing room."

But as he spoke a dressing room door opened and Carstairs came out of it, smiling contentedly. He turned and called back to the actor inside:

"Thanks again for an enjoyable evening. You bet I'll see you next year." Then he came straight over to Frawley and hooked his arm in his. "All right, Colonel, shall we go? And Mr. Allington, too?"

Neville nodded, luckily recognizing his latest assumed name. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the dressing-room door slammed shut by the actor inside of it.

"I hate to hurry you, gentlemen," said the announcer, "but we blast out at once."

The trio retrieved their helmets and strode off into the night. By then, the skyport was deserted and the floodlights taken in. When they reached the copter they saw the flash and heard the woosh as the big ship roared away on her rockets.

"Back to the old routine and bedroom," sighed Mr. Carstairs as he heard it leave. "It was good while it lasted, though."

"Yep," chuckled the colonel. "Hop in and we'll drop you at home."

Three minutes later they were before

the Carstairs' truly-palatial mansion. "Come in a second and speak to Mariquita," invited the magnate.

"No, thanks. It's late. . . ."

Neville's elbow dug into his superior's ribs with a vicious nudge.

". . . but if you insist. . . ."

Mrs. Carstairs met them in the ante-room, greeted the inspector cordially and kissed her husband affectionately. They stood for the rest of the brief visit with their arms circled about one another. Her Spanish blood heritage was evident in her warm dark eyes and proud carriage. Equally evident, were the lines of past suffering in her face. It did not take a detective to see that here was a pair who had at last found mutual consolation.

On the way back to headquarters nothing was said. But later, while they were undressing, the colonel remarked:

"Good show. Did it throw your mind off your troubles?"

"No," said Neville curtly.

"Well," said the inspector, "a good night's sleep will. G'night."

There was no sleep that night for Billy Neville, though. He spent it mentally digesting all the stuff he had read that afternoon, and all that he had seen and heard that night. He devoted many weary hours to a review of his own mind's copy of the famous rogue's gallery at the Luna Central Base. The picture he wanted wasn't there. He wished fervently he had taken that refresher course on hypnotism when they had offered it to him two years ago. He wished he had not been such a softy as to let himself be shunted off to look at that dizzy switchboard. He should have taken a closer look at the showboat people. He wished . . . but hell, what was the use? Pallas' half-sized sun was up and today was another day.

THE meanest of all trails to follow is a cold trail. Or almost. Perhaps the worst is no trail. It is hard to keep interest up. Then, too, Pallas was a dull place—orderly as a church, where people simply worked and behaved themselves. The days dragged by, and nothing out of the way happened. Neville went through the motions of trying to sell clothing in majestic lots of hundreds, but no one was interested. He even talked vaguely

of looking for a site for an outer warehouse for his company. He saw Mr. Carstairs often and became a welcome guest at the house.

Yet with this lack of incident, Neville was at all times alert in his study of the man he was watching. He could not help remembering that little while after the showboat performance that Carstairs had been absent from them. He particularly kept his mind open for any slow change in him, such as could be the result of a mysterious delayed-action drug or from post-hypnotic effect. But there was none that he could detect, nor did the colonel notice anything of the sort, though Neville spoke to him on the subject several times.

The first indication that all was not well came from Mariquita Carstairs herself. Neville happened in one day for lunch and found her red-eyed and weeping. Then she added that she had worried a great deal the last few days about her husband's health.

"When I watch him when he doesn't know it," she said anxiously, "he looks *different*—so wily, crafty and wicked. And he is not like that. He is the dearest man in the world. He *must* be sick."

Neville left as early as possible, and at once consulted Frawley.

"Yes," said the inspector thoughtfully, "she's right. In the last day or so I've noticed a subtle change myself. I blundered into his office the other day and he had his safe open and mountains of files all over the floor. He was actually rude to me. Wanted to know what I meant by barging in on him like that. Imagine!"

The communicator on the wall buzzed. The signal light showed it was the sky-port calling. Neville could overhear what the rasping voice was saying.

"Peters at airport reporting. Mr. Carstairs has made reservation on ship *Fanfare* for passage to Vesta. Ship arrives in half an hour; departs immediately."

By the time Frawley had acknowledged and cut the connection, Neville had already ordered the copter.

"I'm on my way," he cried. "This is *it!* Give me a complete travel-kit quick and an Extra-Special transformation outfit."

Two minutes later Neville was on his

way to the landing field, the two valuable bags between his knees. He was there when the spaceship landed, and was inside it before Simeon Carstairs showed up. The copter soared away the moment he had left it. Carstairs would not know he had a shadow.

Neville went straight to the captain, whom he found resting momentarily in his cabin. He flashed his badge.

"I am your steward from here to Vesta," he told him. "Send for your regular one at once and give him his instructions."

"But my dear sir," objected the captain, rising from his bunk, "as much as I would like to cooperate, I cannot do that. You must know that under the new regulations all members of a ship's crew must be photographed and the pictures posted in prominent parts of the ship. It is your own police rule and is for the protection of passengers from imposters."

"Never mind that," snapped Neville, "get him in here."

The steward came and Neville studied him carefully. He was a swarthy man with heavy shoulders and thick features. His eyes were jet black. But his height was little different from that of the special investigator.

"Say something," directed Neville, "I want to hear your voice. Recite the twelve primary duties of a steward."

The man obeyed.

"It's okay," announced Neville when he had finished. "I can do it."

He gave the captain a word of warning, then went with the steward to his room. There he handed the astonished man a hundred-sol credit note and told him to hit the bunk.

"Here's your chance to catch up on your rest and reading," said Neville grimly. "You don't leave that bunk until I tell you to, y'understand? If you do, it will cost you five years in the mines of Ob-eron."

The steward gasped and lay back on the pillow. He gasped some more when Neville yanked his box of transformations open and spread its contents on the table. His eyes fairly bulged as he watched Neville shoot injections of wax into his deltoids and biceps until the policeman's shoulders were the twins of his own. He saw him puff up his face, thicken the nose

and load the jowls, and after that paint himself with dye, not omitting the hair. Then, marvel of marvels, he saw him drop something in his eyes and sit shuddering for a few seconds while the stuff worked. When the eyes were opened again they were as black as his own!

"How's dis, faller?" asked Neville in the same flat, sullen tone the steward had used in the cabin. "Lanch is sarved, sor . . . zhip gang land in one hour, marm . . . hokay?"

"Gard!" was the steward's last gasp. Then he lapsed into complete speechlessness.

NEVILLE darted out into the passage. The baggage of the sole passenger to get on at Pallas lay in the gangway, and its owner, Mr. Carstairs, stood impatiently beside it. He growled something about the rotten service on the Callisto-Earth run, but let the steward pick up the bags. Then he followed close behind. "Lay out your t'ings, sor?" queried Neville, once inside the room.

"No," said Carstairs savagely. "When I want anything I will ask for it. Otherwise, stay out of my room."

"Yas, sor," was what Neville said in return, but to himself "Phew! The old boy *has* changed. I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way."

He had no intention of obeying Carstairs' injunction to stay out of his room. That night he served the evening meal, and with it was a glass of water. He had taken the precaution to drop a single minim of somnolene in it—that efficacious sleep-producer permitted to only seven members of the I.P., tasteless, colorless and odorless, and without after-effect.

In the second hour of the sleep period, the false steward stole down the passage and with a pass key unfastened the door lock. There was an inside bolt to deal with as well, but an ingenious tool that came with the travel-kit took care of that. A moment later Neville was in the slumbering man's room. Five minutes later he was back in his own, and stacked on the deck beside him was all the baggage the magnate of Pallas had brought with him.

One piece opened readily enough, and its contents seemed innocuous. But the

methodical police officer was not content with superficial appearances. He examined the articles of clothing in it, and the more he looked the more his amazement grew. There were no less than four sets of costumes in it. Moreover, they were for men of different build. One stout, two medium, one spare. In the bottom was a set of gray canvas bags—slip-covers with handles. Neville puzzled over them a moment, then recognized their function. They were covers for the very baggage he was examining. He had to use special tools to open the second bag and found it contained a make-up kit quite the equal of his own.

"Ouch," he muttered. "This guy is as good as I am."

The third and heaviest bag was a tougher job. It was double-locked and strapped, and heavy seals had been put on the straps. The Extra-Special travel-kit equipment took care of the locks and seals, but the contents of the bag were beyond anything a travel-kit could handle. They were documents—damning documents—neatly bundled up, each bound with its own ribbon and seal. Had Neville had twenty-four hours in a well-equipped laboratory with a sufficient number of assistants, he might have forged passable but less incriminating substitutes for them. As it was, he was helpless to do a very artistic job of switching. One package dealt with certain long-forgotten passages in Mrs. Carstairs' life, while others dealt with certain business transactions.

From that case, Neville chose to abstract all of them except the one which formed the outer wrapper. To make up the bulk he filled the bundle with blank paper, tied it up again and resealed it. He dealt likewise with the packet that contained the formulae for the radiation extraction process. And, for the good of the Service, he pursued the same course with regard to a rather detailed report on the foibles and weaknesses of a certain police colonel stationed in Pallas. There was not a hint of scandal or corruption in that, but often ridicule is as potent a weapon as vilification. After that came the tedious business of censoring the rest, repacking the bag as it had been, and restoring the locks and seals. The gently snoring Carstairs never knew when his

bags were returned to him, nor heard the faint scuffling as his door was rebolted and relocked.

"VASTA, sor, in one hour," announced his steward to him eight hours later. "Bags out, sor?"

"When we get there," growled the magnate, yawning heavily, glancing suspiciously about the room. He locked the door behind the steward, didn't leave until the ship was cradled.

Neville watched him go ashore. Then he hurried in to see the skipper again.

"You will be compensated for this," he said hurriedly. "You can have your steward back on the job again. How long do you stay here?"

"Three hours, curse the luck. We usually touch and go, but this time I have an ethergram ordering me to wait here for a special passenger. Why in hell can't these hicks in the gravel belt learn to catch a ship on time?"

"Ah," breathed Neville. "That makes a difference. I think I'll stay with you. Have you a vacant room where I can hang out for the remainder of the voyage?"

"Yes."

Neville did another lightning change—back to Special Investigator Billy Neville of the I.P.—uniform and all. He was standing near the spacelock when the expected passenger came aboard.

Neville could not suppress a murmur of approval as he saw his quarry approaching. As an artist in his own right, he appreciated artistry when he saw it. The marl coming down the field was Carstairs, but what a different Carstairs! He was more slender, he had altogether different clothes on, he had a different gait. His complexion was not the same. But the height was the same, and the bags he carried were the same shape and size, except for their gray canvas coverings. There was a little notch in the right ear that he had not troubled to rectify in the brief time he had had for his transformation in what was undoubtedly his pre-arranged hideaway on Vesta.

"What is the next stop, skipper?" Neville whispered to the captain.

"New York."

"I'll stay out of sight until then."

Any passenger on that voyage of the *Fanfare* will tell you that her captain should have been retired years before. He made three bad tries before he succeeded in lowering his ship into the dock at the skyport. The passengers did not know, of course, that he had to stall to permit a certain member of the I.P. to make a parachute landing from the stratosphere.

Billy Neville hit the ground not four miles from the designated skyport. A commandeered copter took him to it just in time to see the squat passenger vessel jetting down into her berth. He looked anxiously about the station. There was not a uniformed man in sight except a couple of traffic men of the local detachment. He needed help and lots of it.

Neville had no choice but to play his trump card. It was a thing reserved only for grave emergencies. But he considered the present one grave. He took his police whistle out of his vest pocket and shrilled it three times. It was a supersonic whistle—its tone only audible to first-class detectives having tuned vibrators strapped over their hearts. To sound a triple supersonic call was the police equivalent of sending out an eighth alarm fire-call. But Neville blew the blast. Then waited.

A man strolled up and asked the way to Newark.

"Wait," said Neville, only he did not use words but merely lifted his right eyebrow slightly. It was not long before four others came up and craved directions as to how to get to Newark. He lit a cigarette as they gathered around.

"The ship *Fanfare* has just landed—out of Callisto with wayside stops in the Belt. There is a passenger carrying three bags covered by gray canvas. Tail him. Tail everybody he contacts. If you need help, ask local HQ. If they can't give enough, ask Luna. But whatever you do, don't make a pinch. This guy is small fry. My code number is. . . ."

Neville knew better than to flash a badge on these men, even if he was in uniform. Both badges and uniforms could be counterfeited. But he knew that they knew from his procedure that he was a department agent.

"There he comes," he warned, and promptly ducked behind a fruit stall and walked away.

HEADQUARTERS readily gave him a rocket and a driver to take him to Lunar Base. He had no trouble breaking down the barriers between him and the second most important man in the I.P.—the first being the General-General in Charge of Operations. The man he wanted to see was the Colonel-General, Head of the Bureau of Identification.

Neville allowed himself to be ushered into the office, but it was not without trepidation, for old Col.-General O'Hara had a vile reputation as a junior-baiter. He was not at all reassured when he heard the door click to behind him with the click which meant to his trained ears that the door would never be opened again without the pressure of a foot on a certain secret pedal concealed somewhere in the room. Nor did the appearance of the man behind the desk do anything to relieve his own lack of ease.

O'Hara was a gnome, scarcely five feet tall, with bulging eyes and wild hair that stood helter-skelter above his wrinkled face. He was staring at his desk blotter with a venomous expression, and his lower lip hung out a full half-inch. Neville stood rigidly at attention before him for a full three minutes before the old man spoke. Then he looked up and barked a caustic, "Well?"

"I am Special Investigator Neville, sir," he said, "and I want the pedigree of a certain notorious criminal whose picture is lacking in the gallery."

"Stuff and nonsense!" snorted the Colonel-General. "There is no such criminal. Man and boy, I have run this bureau since they moved it to the Moon. Why—oh, why—do they let you rookies in here to bother me?"

"Sir," said Neville stiffly, "I am no rookie. I am a . . ."

"Bah! We have—or had, at last night's report—eight hundred and ninety-three of your 'specials' half of them on probation. When you've spent, as I have spent, sixty-two years. . . ."

"I'm sorry, sir," urged Neville, "we can't go into that now. Do what you want to with me afterwards, but I assure you this is urgent. I am on the trail of a higher-up in the Callisto-Trojan extortion racket. Do I get the information I am

after, or do I turn in my agent badge?"

"Huh?" said the old general, sitting up and looking him straight in the face. "What's that?"

"I mean it, sir. I have trailed one of the higher-up stooges to Earth and set shadows on him. I *think* I have seen the king-pin of the mob, and I want to know who he is," Neville went on to describe the presentation of the showboat entertainment, with special emphasis on his hunches and suspicions. To the civilian mind, the things he told might seem silly, but to a policeman they were fraught with meaning. His description of the suspect was not one of appearance; it was a psychological description—a description based wholly on intuition and not at all on tangibles. He had not proceeded far before the wrinkled old man thumped the desk with a garled fist.

"Hold it," he said, "I think I know the man you mean. But give me time—my memory is not what it used to be.

Neville waited patiently at the rigid attitude of attention while the shriveled old veteran before him rocked back and forth in his chair with the lids closed over his bulging eyes, cracking his bony knuckles like castanets. O'Hara seemed to have gone into something like a trance. Suddenly, after a quiver of the eyelids, he stared up at Neville.

"It all comes back now. You were a member of the class of '14 and I was instructor—a major then. I took all of you to see a certain show on Broadway, as they call it, in order . . ."

"Yes, sir," cried Neville, eagerly, "that was it! You told us the principal character in the play was the most dangerous potential criminal of our generation and that we should mark him well and remember. It was a very hard assignment, for we only saw him from before the foot-lights and he was acting the part of a Viking chieftain and most of his face was covered with false white whiskers."

Old O'Hara smiled.

"You seem to have been an apt pupil. At any rate, that man was Milo Lunko, a thoroughly unprincipled and remarkably clever blackmailer. He was so clever, in fact, that we were never able to make an arrest stick, let alone bring him to trial. That accounts for the absence of his pic-

ture from the gallery. He was also clever enough to fake his own death. The evidence we have as to that was so convincing we closed the file on him."

"It's open again," said Neville grimly. "How did he work?"

"LUNKO was not only an actor, but a producer and clever playwright as well. He might have achieved fame and fortune legitimately, but he became greedy. He teamed up with a shady character named Krascbik who ran a private investigating agency, specializing in social scandals. Krascbik's men would study the private life of influential individuals and dig out their scandals. They would provide Lunko with slow-motion camera studies of them so he could learn the peculiarities of their carriage, mannerisms, voice, and all their other idiosyncracies.

"Lunko's next step would be to write a scurrilous play based on the confidential information provided by Krascbik, and put it in rehearsal, using characters that resemble the actual principals. . . ."

"But that's libel," objected Neville, "why couldn't you haul him in?"

"Blackmail, young man, is a delicate matter to handle. The injured party shrinks from publicity and usually prefers to pay rather than have his scandal aired. Lunko never actually publicly produced any of those nauseous plays. His trick was to invite the victim to a preview—a dress rehearsal, then let Nature take its course. Invariably, the victim was frightened and tried to induce him to call off the presentation. Lunko would protest that the play had been written in good faith and had already cost him a great deal of money. The pay-off, of course, was always big. Lunko drove many people to the brink of ruin.

"One man did refuse to play with him, and turned the case over to us. Lunko carried out his threat and produced the show, much to the delight of the scandal-mongers. It was outrageously libelous and we promptly closed the joint and took him in. . . ."

"And then. . . ."

"And then," croaked O'Hara, rolling his pop-eyes toward the ceiling and pursing his lips, "and then we let him go. He

had a trunkful of data on many, many important people. Some of them, I hate to tell you, were my seniors in this very Service. We could do nothing about it, for, unfortunately, all the stuff he had on them was true. We might have sent him to the mines for a short term, but he would have retaliated by standing our entire civilization on its head with his exposures. We compromised by letting him escape and go into exile. The understanding was that he was never to come inside the orbit of Mars. A while after that, he was reported killed in a landslide on Europa. We shut the book and proceeded to forget him."

"He mimicked the character exactly?"

"Not exactly. Just enough to clearly indicate them. Although, I am convinced that, if he chose, he could have taken off any person he had studied, with enough fidelity to fool anybody except perhaps a man's own wife."

Neville gave a little start. That was the item that had slowed him the most. Had Lunko improved his technique to the extent that he could even fool a wife? Was the Carstairs he was trailing really Carstairs, or an understudy? He had deceived both his old friend and his own wife for a time, but even they had admitted noting a subtle change. Who was this phoney Carstairs? Where was the real Carstairs? Or, Neville wondered, was his original theory of drugs or hypnotism correct?

"Thank you, General," he said. "You have been a big help. I have to go over to Operations now and get the past and future itineraries of the showboat. In another hour, I may begin to know something about this case."

"It's nothing," said O'Hara, promptly closing his eyes and folding his knotty fingers on his breast. "It's all in the day's work. Luck to you."

Neville heard the click as the secret door lock was released and he knew the interview was terminated. He backed away, stepped through the door and out into the corridor.

NEVILLE went straight to the great library where the I. P. records are kept. An attendant brought him the bulky folder on the old Lunko gang. Neville

found it engrossing reading, and the day waned and night came before he had committed all its contents to memory.

Billy Neville obtained a televisic connection with Tellurian headquarters.

"How are your shadows doing?"

He had already learned the real identity of the man he had trailed from Pallas; he was an actor belonging to the original ring and went by the name of Hallam.

"Our shadows are doing fine," replied the officer at the other end, "but your friend Hallam seems unhappy. He made two calls on a high officer of the Radiation Corporation and after the second one he came very angry and ruffled looking. He has also called on several other persons, known to us as extortioners, and at least two of those are on his trail with blood in their eye."

"I know," chuckled Neville. "He sold 'em a bill of goods—rolls of blank paper. They think they've been double-crossed. And they have, only I'm the guy that did it. But say, we can't have him killed—not yet. Better round up all his contacts and put 'em away, incommunicado. I'm hopping a rocket right now and will be with you in a jiffy."

It did not take the police long to make the little jump from Luna to Tellus, and a couple of hours later Neville was confronting Hallam in a special cell. In his hands he held a first-class ticket to Titan in the Saturn group, which had come out of Hallam's pocket, as well as a handbill of the showboat announcing an appearance there in the near future.

"I just wanted to study your current rig, Hallam," explained Neville, opening up his make-up kit. "Impersonation is a game that more than one can play at. I'm going in your place to Titan. I'm a *teeny-weeny* bit curious as to what happens to your victims. Extortion carries good stiff sentences, but they lack the finality of that for murder."

THE Neville that left the cell was the exact duplicate of Hallam, and by dint of exacting search of the actor's trick garments and the use of adroit questioning under pressure, the Special Investigator knew exactly what he had to do. And he knew ever better, after the space-ship he was riding settled down into the re-

ceiving berth on Titan. An actor of Lunko's—a skinny, gaunt fellow—was on hand to meet him, and a little later they conferred in a well-screened spot with three of Lunko's jackals.

"The layout here is a cinch," explained the skinny actor. "The two biggest shots are the president of the Inter-satellite Transportation Company and the fellow who owns the bulk of shares in the *phlagis* plantations. A year or so ago they were mixed up in a most ludicrous near-scandal that people are still tittering over. A situation like that is a natural for us. Lunko has already sent the script on ahead. It's funny enough to tickle the town, but not so raw it will make the principals sore. We will deal with them in the usual way, when they come backstage after the show."

"Uh, huh," said Neville, and asked to see the descriptions. They lit up the projector and began running three-dimensional views of their intended victims. The preliminary studies had been most comprehensive and Neville knew before the hour was up that not a mannerism or intonation of voice had been overlooked. To persons skilled in disguise the problem was not so much one of imitation, but of introducing a telling imperfection that would allay suspicion of a possible more perfect imitation later.

The remainder of their time until the showboat came, they spent in gruelling rehearsals.

NEVILLE watched the show from the wings and was gratified to note the considerable sprinkling of plainclothes-men in the audience. The show was good, as it had been before, and the audience was highly enthusiastic. Then came the curtain call and the announcement of the special performance. When the lights were down and his cue came, Neville walked on and performed his silly role. Then there was a hubbub of applause and wild calls for an encore. A few minutes later the two men they had lampooned came backstage, grinning sheepishly, yet apparently resolved to show themselves good sports.

"You would have more privacy in the dressing rooms," suggested Lunko suavely, and ushered each into the private closet

of the man who had just mimicked him. Neville found himself face to face with a near-double.

"Step on it," said Lunko harshly, who had followed. He flicked on a peculiarly brilliant overhead light, and the startled victim looked up at it with the helpless, hopeless gaze of a lamb being led to the slaughter. "Change your makeup while I drag the dope out of him. I've got another one to do after this, you know."

Neville grunted and began plucking away the comedy elements of his burlesque get-up. Then, with the deftness of long experience he made his appearance match the poor dupe's to the chair. Meanwhile Lunko had forced his victim into the depths of hypnotic trance and was extracting all the secret knowledge that the snooping jackals had been unable to obtain indirectly.

"You've got it all, now?" asked Lunko, impatiently, "The combination of his safe, his office and home habits? I've drained him dry, I believe."

Neville nodded.

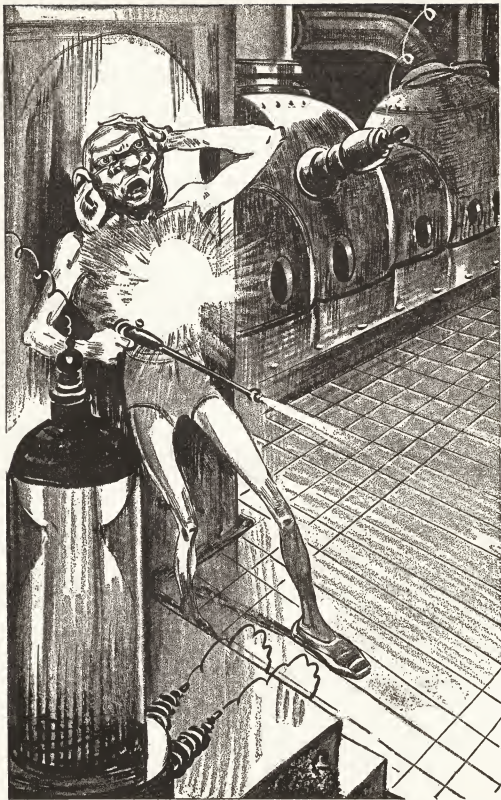
"Stand back, you fool!" screamed Lunko, as Neville awkwardly stepped against him just as he was about to swing the bludgeon that would finish the now valueless victim, "we've just time to get this one into the incinerator. . . ."

He never finished, for at that instant Neville sprang from the balls of his feet and a heavy fist smashed into the black-mailer's jaw with a crash that told of a shattered jawbone. Another battering ram of a fist smashed him to the floor.

Neville's high-frequency whistle was out and the shrill, inaudible alarm tingling on the breasts of the key men waiting outside. Then he was dashing for the adjoining dressing room where a similar little drama was just being brought to its close. A swift jab of fire from the blaster that appeared magically in Neville's hand sent the actor to his death. Other policemen were dashing up and the second hypnotist suddenly lost interest in his surroundings, going down onto his knees, a mass of battered pulp.

Then Neville sat down and began thoughtfully removing the makeup he so detested.

"I wonder," he complained to himself, "whether I'm ever going to get that leave."



The electronic beam caught Bhruulo squarely in his chest.

CITY OF THE LIVING FLAME

By HENRY HASSE

The legendary city of M'Tonak lay hidden beneath Mar's Polar cap, its heart a pulsing flame from outer space. Jim Lander found the fabulous green flame, found it sentiently, evilly alive—and that its living meant death for all mankind.

STARTLED into action, Jim Lander straightened in his seat. He peered eagerly through the forward viewport of the tiny rocket-plane.

From the Martian metropolis that nestled in the opposite hemisphere, thirteen hundred miles away, he had taken the poorly-mapped, wearisome, rocket-course of

Illustrated by Morey



the Polar route in order to save time. Thus he avoided being hampered by the magnetic storms raging over the Red Desert at this season. At least, so he'd told his friends.

But the real, the all-important reason he had kept to himself. It was not only that they would have laughed at him, that mattered little; but that a growing, nameless dread made him even more reserved than usual. He smiled thinly now as he visualized their reactions had he dared mention the mythical city of M'Tonak. M'Tonak, city of forgotten men, where reposed the fabulous emerald large enough to ransom a world!

Yes, Jim thought without bitterness; at last he had joined the fatal number of men, usually Earthmen, who had searched for M'Tonak. He was persuaded against all reason that it did exist somewhere among the polar wastes, and it was most imperative that he find it! He was sure that then he would find his brother too, who had disappeared scarcely a month before. In his perilous passage above the Cap, Jim had zig-zagged the rocket-plane dangerously off its course, searching the limitless white wastes with the intentness of desperation. But in vain.

"Well," he murmured now, "no M'Tonak, so I'll settle for Riida—for the time being."

The tiny Martian town was beneath him, its crazy conical structures reaching up like pointing forefingers. Jim's hand came down on the descent lever. A ghostly whirr disturbed the stillness as the plane's stubby wings sliced the atmosphere on its downward glide. It contacted gently, plowing a shallow furrow in the powdery sand that rose cloud-fine to engulf him as he climbed out. Already he saw two men hurrying toward him from the town.

"One of them must be Conley," he decided and went forward to meet the mine superintendent.

"HELLO, Jim Landor, welcome to Riida!" Conley shook hands with a quiet, unobtrusive pleasure that seemed sincere. Jim liked him immediately. He noted his straight-forward eyes, the faint burr of his booming Irish voice and the

little mannerism of thoughtfully rubbing his hand across his massive chin.

The other Earthman, Conley introduced as Wessel, the newly arrived surveying engineer for "Tri-Planetary Mining." As Jim glanced at the thin features and small wiry frame, he sensed something hard behind the man's clouded eyes. Wessel remained silent, smiling inscrutably as he listened to their conversation.

"So you came across the Cap, eh Landor?" Conley said friendly, taking Jim's arm as they trudged toward the town. "Any sign of M'Tonak?" And as Jim looked at him sharply he hastened to add: "Not that I'm poking fun at you, lad. But you're news now, you know, same as anyone who goes seeking for M'Tonak. Heard a news-story about you on the Trans-telector not more'n a couple hours ago."

"I thought my flight was a secret."

"Ah, no! No man's flight is secret who comes over the Martian Cap. That can mean but one thing. Yep, the legend of M'Tonak is rife once more, first time in two years. You're supposed to be searching for the lost city . . . now, what would ye be wanting with an emerald that big?" Conley half joked, lapsing into his Irish brogue. "Faith an' it makes a man's head swim to think of such riches."

Jim Landor did not smile. He looked at Conley seriously. "I've only been on Mars a year, but naturally I'd heard stories of M'Tonak long before that. *You* called it a legend just now. Tell me, what is your honest opinion?"

"Well, lad. Certainly there's *something* up there to cause these stories to persist." Conley rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe it's an ancient city called M'Tonak and maybe it ain't. But men in search for it have disappeared too regularly, hardly men who wouldn't ordinarily fail to return from the Polar wastes. And—and if there is a M'Tonak, your brother may have reached it."

"I shall find my brother," Jim said with a soft certainty. "That's why I'm here. What about that Martian, the one you said accompanied Frank into the Cap? Is he here now?"

"He is, and you shall talk to him. But

lad, I'm afraid he can't tell you any more than I did in the letter."

"I want to hear it first hand."

"Sure," Conley nodded understandingly.

They walked in silence through the powdery sand, nearing the town. Jim glanced at Wessel, silent still, his hieratic smile barely perceptible. There was an uncanny aura to the man as if he were immersed in a world of his own where Jim and Conley had no part.

"There's Frank's mine," Conley pointed beyond the town toward a low line of hills. "If you look close you can see his shack over there. As you probably know, he was—well, the independent type. Refused to sell out to Tri-Planetary Mining. That's why he went on north when his claim petered out, in an effort to find the source of the radite veins. Want to go over there and look around?"

"Later," Jim said shortly.

They entered the sprawling town with its curious Martian dwellings. Jim had never ceased to marvel at them. They were conical and glistening, built of a reddish manufactured silica. They were surrounded by an ascending spiral dotted with entrances to the very top. Jim sometimes wondered, too, at the manner in which Martians tolerated so much from the Earthmen. But then, it was well known that activity to a Martian was the final degradation. They looked upon the exertions of the Earthman in a mixture of uncomprehending wonder and supercilious amusement, much as a human might watch the eternal hustle of a colony of ants. There was a world of philosophic contemplation, peace and indolence.

Now, as they proceeded along the straggling main street of Riida, Jim wondered about them even more. From various ramps of the conical buildings residents watched them silently. Tall, wasp-waisted Martians, dark and leathery, passed them leisurely on the street without a word. They weren't sullen, it was as though they didn't care. Jim peered into their heavy-lidded eyes. Colorless eyes, always. He was startled at the somnolence he saw there. It struck a vague disturbing note in his brain that was dashed away by Conley's booming voice:

"Here we are!"

THEY had reached a squat, basaltic building which bore the legend TRI-PLANETARY MINING CORPORATION.

"Enter the lair of the Octopus," Conley laughed, glancing at the gilded sign above him.

Wessel frowned at the words, and by that token Jim knew that he was a Corporation man to the hilt.

Within, Jim found himself in an atmosphere as far removed from Mars as day is from night. The office was plain and unpretentious. There was an old-fashioned desk, a few chairs and some iron lockers against the wall. On the walls, in curious contrast, were pictures of cinema stars several years out of date, and a few yellowed maps of the company's workings.

"Not only has Frank's claim petered out," Conley explained, "but Tri-Planet's is beginning to. That's the reason Wessel's here, to try and trace these radite veins to their source. We think they must stem from somewhere up in the Cap."

Jim nodded. "You haven't many Earthmen here now, have you?"

"About a dozen," Conley shrugged. "More than enough to handle what little radite's left."

"And we wouldn't even need them," Wessel spoke for the first time, "if we could get these damn lazy Martians to stir themselves."

Jim turned his gaze on the man with slowly dawning wonderment, and would have spoken, but was interrupted by Conley:

"Jim, we thought we'd head up into the Cap in the morning, four or five of us. Wessel wanted to leave several days ago, but I insisted on waiting for you. However, I can't say how far north we'll be going. It all depends on the radite traces."

"Thanks, Conley, I really appreciate it. All I know about this Polar Cap is what I saw flying over it. What do we do, make the trek afoot?"

"Afoot, he says!" Wessel scoffed before Conley could answer. "Man, what a lot you've got to learn yet about that country up there!"

"No," Conley answered, with a distasteful glance at Wessel. "Most men

who've tried it afoot have not come back. We're trying it with a couple of sleds. Motor-driven, of course, of very little metal alloy. Furnished benignantly by Tri-Planet Mining, since it's to their advantage that we find new radite deposits." The slight scorn in his voice was not lost on Wessel. "We figure it'll be a two or three day trip each way."

"But of course," Wessel said suavely, "if we find M'Tonak or any other cities up there with big fabulous emeralds, we'll forget about the radite."

Jim was fast learning to dislike this man; he turned to Conley. "I think I'll see this Martian you were telling me about, the one who accompanied my brother."

"Kaarji? Sure. I'll go fetch him."

"Better take me to him instead, I'd rather talk to him alone."

AS Conley had said, Kaarji wasn't of much help. The tall, leathery, heavy-chested Martian was even more taciturn than the usual members of his race. He seemed to show a distrust of Jim.

However, he did agree to accompany Jim across the mile strip of desert to Frank Lendor's mine nestled against the hills. As they trudged through the sand in silence, Jim glanced occasionally at Kaarji. He was sure he had made it plain that he was Frank Lendor's brother. The Martian wasn't dumb, he knew why Jim was here.

With a friendly and almost instinctive gesture Jim offered the Martian a cigarette. Kaarji accepted it, looked at it with distaste as though he had tried them before and abhorred them; but he placed it clumsily in his lips nevertheless and smoked it valiantly. At the same time he reached into his pocket and handed Jim a few tiny purplish objects. Jim accepted them, looked at them and shuddered. He had heard of Martian *tsith* stems and knew that they made almost all Earthmen violently ill. Nevertheless he plopped them into his mouth and began chewing.

Kaarji looked at him approvingly and gave a grotesque smile. As though the Earthman's act were a signal, he began talking.

"I don't like it in town," Kaarji said.

"Too many Earthmen. I like it over here."

"At Frank's mine, you mean?"

"Yes. Frank Lendor was a fine man. I am sorry he did not come back."

"Perhaps he will come back," Jim suggested.

But Kaarji shook his head.

It took very little effort then to get the entire story. It seemed that Frank Lendor and Kaarji had trekked four days into the Martian Cap. Only Kaarji had ever gone that far before. Late on the fourth day, as they camped, Kaarji was awakened by a shout from Frank. He had leaped up and glimpsed Frank Lendor running toward a vehicle that rested at the bottom of an icy decline. . . .

Here Kaarji faltered slightly in his story. He had not seen the vehicle plainly enough nor long enough to describe it as other than a car, seemingly unlike any he had ever seen before. It was simply round and grayish and metallic, and completely enclosed. It had a bluish beam of light in the front of it. Frank Lendor had seemed to enter the car—and then it sped away with him.

"Kaarji, try to remember," Jim said to the Martian now. "Frank entered the car of his own volition? You saw no one else, no other person?"

"No one else." Kaarji seemed sure of it.

Jim shook his head in puzzlement. This was the same story Kaarji had told Conley, there were no discrepancies.

They walked on to the mine in silence. Jim examined several tunnels leading back into the hills and saw that Frank's claim had indeed petered out. In his iron-walled cabin, everything was left as though Frank had merely gone and intended to return in a few days.

"Let's go back," Jim said finally. "Nothing we can do here."

On the walk back to Riida, Jim thought that Kaarji looked at him several times as though he were going to speak. But when Jim questioned him, the Martian shook his head negatively. He offered Kaarji another cigarette but this time it was declined.

It was not until then that Jim realized he was still chewing on the Martian *tsith*

stems, and that Kaarji was grinning at him.

It was not until he reached the edge of town that he became violently ill.

II

THE sun rose on a crystal clear morn- and glanced beckoningly from the white expanse that capped the cliffs a few miles distant. Five men were making the trip: Jim and Kaarji, Conley, Wessel and Lewis, the latter, one of the workmen who had had some Polar experience.

The motor-sled parts were light but bulky, and it took a dozen men to transport them across to the cliffs and up into the Cap, where they would be assembled.

"I want to tell you something about Kaarji," Conley said, walking beside Jim as the trek began. "He's not like other Martians, not philosophic and indolent. On the contrary he seems—well, *restless*."

"I know the type," Jim nodded. "I've seen a few of them myself, even in the Capitol City; amazingly energetic for Martians, restless and perpetually wandering as though seeking for—for something vague and unknown even to them."

"That describes Kaarji, all right," Conley nodded emphatically. "Jim, three times in the past year he's left here abruptly and trekked alone up into those Polar wastes. He'd be gone for days and then show up here again, exhausted and brooding, as if he'd just missed his goal. And the last time was with Frank Landor. That mean anything to you?"

Jim shook his head puzzledly.

"Now I wonder," Conley murmured, "what he always finds so interesting up there in that wilderness?"

"Probably doesn't find anything. Maybe he's only—seeking. Perpetually seeking."

"Seeking M'Tonak?"

"Maybe."

Conley scoffed. "Now what would Kaarji do with the emerald of M'Tonak if he did find it? Of what value would it be to *any* Martian, to the whole dying Martian race?"

"Maybe it isn't the emerald the Martians are interested in."

Conley was startled, glanced sharply at

him, but Jim kept his eyes on the huge bulk of Kaarji ahead.

They reached the black cliffs and entered a narrow defile that led gradually upward, tortuously. The rock was a soft, igneous basalt which at times made footing extremely hazardous. After an hour of this Kaarji stopped abruptly in a level place.

They leaned thankfully against the cliff wall, and stared out upon the curving gleam of the Red Desert far below. There the hazes of pinkish dust were beginning to drift and the sun was beginning to bite.

They continued when Kaarji continued. An hour later the air had become a chilling blast sweeping down the widening ravine. Luckily the ascent was becoming less steep as they neared the top. It levelled off into a shallow little gorge, then they were beyond that, emerging out onto the plateau.

Scattered patches of dark rocky terrain showed here, where green growing things struggled pitifully to maintain a meagre existence. Less than a mile away the real Cap began, dazzling white and forbidding.

Reaching there, the two sleds were assembled in a few minutes. The five who were to make the trip now readjusted their packs and put on the priceless coats of Praaka fur, unbelievably light and cold repelling. They also painstakingly tightened the high fabricord leggings Conley had insisted they wear. Jim wondered why, but asked no questions as he followed suit.

The supplies were on the sleds, but each man carried a fully charged electropistol and a small, light metal tank strapped to his side.

"Acid spray," Conley explained laconically. "Don't worry, you'll realize the use for it before long."

NOW the real trip began.

"Kaarji, you and Lewis take the first sled," Conley instructed. "We'll follow."

The Martian nodded. The motors purred and the sleds moved slowly away.

"Yes, we'll follow him," Wessel murmured. "Just as long as he sticks fairly close to the radite veins, we will. *This* is what I'm going by." And he touched the

little metallic device at his wrist, which Jim knew was susceptible through super-sensitive coils to all radite emanations within a radium of several miles.

Conley frowned but nodded mute agreement. And now for the first time it really dawned on Jim that he and Kaarji were apart from these other men. He and the Martian were up here seeking, not radite deposits, but something else. The same thing but for different reasons. Jim determined to try, at the first opportunity, to probe into that big Martian's mind.

Now they were speeding into the real Polar vastness. Kaarji's sled ahead of them dipped and rose across long icy undulations. The terrain was wide and white and peaceful as far as Jim could see. He began to wonder why men had never been able to penetrate very far up here. Even afoot it ought not to be hard, but this was ridiculously easy! As he huddled there in his place on the sled he was very warm and cozy beneath his coat of Praaka fur. He began to get drowsy. . . .

JIM awoke with a start from the deep, firm depths of somnolence. He was aware that they had been moving for a long time, probably many hours. Now the sky was dark above him and he could see a few stars. But *something* had shattered his drowsiness to jerk him back to reality, and he wondered what it was.

Then he knew, as it came again. There was a sudden movement beneath them. The sled lurched crazily. Conley was shouting something, as their sled pulled up beside Kaarji's, which was lying half on its side.

The men stepped down. Again there came that sudden movement, and Jim nearly fell! Startled, he looked down and saw that the very ice cap was moving beneath their feet, or rather it was expanding! Long lines began to appear in every direction. As far as he could see, the surface was a vast mosaic pattern.

Conley stood there with his hands on his hips, staring around. Wessel was cursing softly and looked angry.

"This wouldn't have happened," Wessel said, "if you'd taken my advice and left two days ago! Tomorrow it'll be worse. It'll slow us to a walk. We may as well

not have brought along any sleds."

"It would've happened anyway!" Conley snapped testily. "It's just our damnable luck that it had to come early this year. I didn't expect this to start for another month yet. Well, we may as well camp here and get a good start in the morning."

Jim looked at the mosaic pattern across the ice and was relieved to see that it had stopped moving. He peered down into a crack an inch wide, where a billowing powdery stuff exuded to spread thinly over the surface. He touched the stuff with his bare hand. It was uncannily different from snow, being infinitely more powdery yet dazzling white and deadly cold.

"You're witnessing the start of the Polar Cap's receding," Conley explained with a wry smile. "It does that twice a year, you know, getting smaller to about half its present size.

"Receding!" Jim exclaimed. "The damn stuff's expanding, you mean."

"It only looks that way. This is just the preliminary. Soon the extreme edges will vanish away and then the entire Cap will begin receding, for some strange reason. When that starts to happen, too bad for any man caught up here. Frankly, Jim, I should say that, if this continues tomorrow, we ought to head back."

That struck an ominous note in Jim's heart, but he said nothing. To return now would mean they must wait several months before making another attempt.

It was while helping to unroll the wide fabricoid mats that Jim felt the sharp, biting pain just above his knee. He ignored it at first. Then it came again, and he looked down. He saw a pale blue, tubular thing about four inches long. It had bitten through his clothing and into his flesh above the knee. Quiescent now, it clung there, and its transparent bluish tint was taking on a crimson flush as it fed upon his blood.

WITH a loathing horror Jim reached down and pulled the thing from him. It did not come away easily. He flung it to the ice and tried to crush it with his heel. It seemed amazingly rubbery, resilient, as it darted away from under his foot. Then he saw that others

had attached to his fabricoid leggings, and were inching their way upward.

Desperately he tried to brush them off, but they clung tenaciously. Another one bit through his trouser leg and into the flesh. It was cold and loathsome to the touch, but he tore it away with his fingers. Then he staggered back, as he saw that the ice was swarming with the things.

"Your acid tube, man, use it!" he heard Conley cry. "That's all that'll stop 'em!"

Already the men were up-ending the sleds, using them as a barricade from behind which they swept the ice with a thin misty spray. Not wishing to chance that acid on his own person, Jim tore the things from his legs one at a time and flung them out into the spray. They writhed and shrivelled and curled upon themselves, lifeless and blackened.

Others were coming up from the crevices now. The ice was a thick, bluish writhing mass of them. Jim added his spray to the others, sweeping it low across the ice. The acid misted and clung there close to the surface, until gradually the greater mass of the bluish things retreated back into the depths.

Kaarji opened a pouch he carried always with him, took out some *tsith* stems and placed them in his mouth. He arose and stood gazing out to the north. Jim watched him.

"Whew!" Conley gasped, wiping beads of cold perspiration from his brow. "Just in time! Let those things once get a foothold up here and there's no stopping them. I guess we've settled for most of them, though, they won't come again."

"But what the devil are they?" Jim asked. "And how can they subsist in this barren country?"

"It's not so barren. Far below the ice are green growing things, at least this far south there is. Those blue tube-things ride down with the ice twice a year, feed, and then migrate back to the north.

"Vegetarians, eh?" Jim grunted. "Then what were those two chewing on me for?"

"Blood's something comparatively new to them, and it seems to drive them wild. They can sense it for amazing distances. They come flocking beneath the ice to wherever anyone stops. There's a story of an Earthman who was lost up here once,

and— Well, never mind. Anyway we'll take turns on guard tonight."

JIM slept fitfully. There were fragmentary nightmares of the ice opening to spew hordes of bluish tube creatures up at him. He was glad when Kaarji awakened him for his turn at guard.

But Kaarji did not return to sleep either. He seemed restless and brooding. He sat beside Jim against one of the sleds, and for a long time there was silence as he stared far out to the north with troubled eyes.

"Jim Landor," he broke the silence at last, "there is one thing I did not tell you."

"I thought there was."

"Frank Landor and I found something. The body of a man in the ice far to the north of here. It had been there a long time."

Jim merely waited for him to go on.

"In his clothing we found some of these." Kaarji fumbled in his pocket, and handed something to Jim.

It was a piece of metal, flat, round and amazingly light. It seemed to have once been part of some ornamentation. What interested Jim, however, was not what it might have been, but rather the metal itself. It was a dull greenish-gray in color and strangely different to the touch from any metal he had ever known. It was somehow reminiscent of radite, but only faintly. In it was a subtle suggestion of—yes, of fabulous strength and power!

In the dim grayness of that Polar night Jim looked at Kaarji and said in a voice he did not recognize as his own:

"Kaarji, do you realize what this means? Up here somewhere there is a city, a former civilization—a M'Tonak! That man you found dead—he reached M'Tonak and was coming back with the news when disaster overtook him! But that might have been many years ago. . . ."

"Tell me something, Kaarji. Why have you come up here three times before? Are you seeking M'Tonak?"

"I do not know. Something calls me. Something inside. And I only know that I must go."

"Is that all, just something calling you?"

"That is all. Except that this time it is

different. This time I know that I shall reach—whatever is calling me, and I shall not return. I am sure of it.”

Jim sat there for a long time, pondering, watching Kaarji pace restlessly back and forth. The Martian was in a strange mood this night. A foreboding mood. Jim gave up puzzling about it, and examined again that strange piece of metal. Here at last was proof of M'Tonak, perhaps the first proof any man outside had ever had! He felt an exuberant hope rising in him.

“Anyway, Kaarji, thanks for telling me about this. Mind if I keep it a while?”

“I want you to have it, Jim Landor.”

III

THEY were away early the next morning, speeding ahead of a gray dawn. Wessel was wrong, the ice no longer shifted beneath them; but the biting sun had not yet risen. Now Jim noticed that Wessel constantly consulted the device at his waist, which registered the proximity of any radite. Apparently, however, he was satisfied with the route Kaarji was taking.

It was about noon when the terrain began to surge gently again as though with a life of its own, and the mosaic pattern of cracks re-appeared. But this was not enough, as yet, to stop them. What did stop them was Wessel, who called a halt a few hours later.

“Must be some Floaters near here,” he told Conley. “I can tell by the way this thing’s acting.” He tapped the radite-finder, whose needle was gyrating erratically.

“Floaters?” Jim asked. “What are they?”

“Trouble,” Conley groaned. More denizens for you to get acquainted with. You’ll see before long.”

“There they come now,” Wessel pointed. “We may as well wait here, and get rid of them once and for all.”

A long line of tiny dots had appeared low on the horizon. They came rapidly nearer and proved to be perfect spheres about a foot in diameter, apparently with an uncanny power of levitation! There were several dozens of them. Hovering in

the air, they circled around the men. A few of them darted in close, experimentally.

Jim threw up a hand instinctively as one zoomed too near his head. His fist contacted the taut, metallic skin of the thing. He felt a slight but inconsequential electric shock. The Floater bounced back lightly as a feather. It hovered there, took on a shimmering, greenish iridescence as though it were glaring at the Earthman. Jim felt an uncanny chill across his brain. He was sure these things were intelligent! Again it zoomed in, but again Jim shoved it back easily.

“That’s it,” Conley said in general to the men who were staving off the pesky things. “Make them keep their distance. They’re really not dangerous, if we keep them away from the metal sleds. That’s what they want.”

The Floaters at last seemed to call a council of war. They gathered in a group behind the men. Conley took advantage of this, and gave the order to move again. But the Floaters followed slowly, longingly. A few of them made tentative darting attempts, but the men were too wary. Suddenly then, *en masse*, the Floaters launched their real attack.

They came from all sides and the men were overwhelmed. A few of the spheres alighted on a sled. The metal began to crumble. Cursing, Conley knocked them away; but others alighted.

“Protect the sleds!” Conley yelled.

The men were trying to. A sphere attached itself to the metal fastenings of a pack, and clung there voraciously. The metal crumbled, disappeared, and the pack spewed its contents over the ice. Instantly the Floater darted to the contents, seeking more metal. Lewis drew his electropistol, but immediately a Floater attached itself to it; the weapon dissolved, disappeared, as the creature took on a rosy radiance of heat-energy.

“Holy Hannah!” Lewis gasped.

Conley was cursing volubly now, but he was suddenly cool.

“All right, you men, let ‘em have it—all at once! Blast ‘em out of the air.”

They threw themselves flat on the ice and swept their weapons around in a solid, crackling barrage. That was the be-

ginning of the end for the Floaters. They exploded in corruscating riots of bluish sparks wherever the electro-beams touched. Soon the ice was littered with their lifeless, deflated husks. The remaining ones sped far away out of danger, and they did not return.

"I hated to do that," Conley sighed, "'cause I kind of like those creatures. They have intelligence of a sort. They're harmless enough ordinarily, except for their voracious appetites for metal!"

"The damn things sometimes visit our mines to the south," Wessel said, "but I'm kind of surprised to find 'em away up *here*. That can only mean one thing, though. We're on the right track! The radite must stem from one huge central deposit somewhere up here!" His eyes gleamed at the thought.

To Jim it meant even more. The converging radite veins, Kaarji's story of the perpetual lure that tormented him, and most of all that mysterious bit of strange metal—all this pointed to one thing, a secret somewhere to the north. And that secret was M'Tonak. Jim was sure of it now. He was sure they would reach it, that they were *meant* to reach it.

The thought surged within him, made him restless and foreboding. So that when, late that day, the car came—the silent mysterious vehicle from out of the north, just as Kaarji had described—Jim was not surprised.

He had been almost expecting it.

IT was while they were making camp. They were rolling out the fabricoid mats and setting up the little atomo-stoves. Jim missed Kaarji, looked around and saw the Martian at the crest of the long, smooth rise at the foot of which they had stopped.

Jim drew his coat of Praaka fur closer around him and walked out to where Kaarji stood. Not until he had gained the crest of the slight ascent did he see that the Martian was in his strange mood again, standing quite still, staring out to the north.

Jim approached very silently. He stood unmoving by Kaarji's side. Now he almost felt it too, an eerie feeling as though ghostly, insistent fingers were tugging at

his brain. Almost, a fascinating wisp of a voice created an urgency within him. But that was imagination! He knew it, even as he drew back.

For a full minute they stood there in silence. Then Kaarji, without even glancing at him, spoke in his curiously clipped monotone:

"So you feel it too, Jim Landor."

"I—I thought I felt something."

"The same thing that I have felt. But I have felt it stronger."

Stretching out below was a long gentle decline, and beyond were the familiar vastnesses of the Polar wastes. Now Jim found himself scanning the far horizon. He felt on the very verge of something strange—and momentous.

Kaarji leaned tensely, suddenly forward. Not the slightest show of emotion was in his voice as he stated:

"It is coming. I know it. It will be here very soon."

Jim did not ask what was coming. He knew. He had known all the time. He stared outward, following Kaarji's gaze, but could see nothing. He waited impatiently as the Martian never once removed his eyes from the horizon. Minutes passed.

THEN . . . much nearer and so clear that even Jim could not mistake it, a dot of light flashed across their vision. Immediately it was gone, hugging the terrain closely as though it had dipped behind an ice dune. It appeared again in the near distance, moving swiftly, unerringly toward them. It resolved itself into a penetrant beam of bluish light, the forward light on a speeding ghostly vehicle.

Abruptly it slowed. It crept silently to the very foot of the slight slope below them. Breathless with wonderment, Jim waited for something to happen. Nothing happened except that the bluish light blinked abruptly off. No door opened. No one nor nothing emerged. Even at this close distance the conveyance was discernible only as a grayish, ghostly shape.

Then Kaarji was running down toward it. Jim was suddenly torn between two desires. He stared after Kaarji and then back at the camp. He shouted to Conley and the others, and saw them look up and

start toward him; then he was dashing madly after Kaarji who had almost reached the ghostly conveyance now.

When Jim reached there, Kaarji was staring at a dark, narrow entrance in the metal hull. "It was already open," the Martian murmured. Then, as though it were expected of him, he stepped unhesitatingly inside.

Jim waited for a single instant during which he surveyed the hull of the vessel. It was not any type of sled, as he had thought; indeed it did not touch the surface at all, but hovered a full foot above the ground. He heard a gentle humming as though of ionization beams. He followed Kaarji inside.

There were no sort of controls that he could see; only a long row of seats filled the entire space. Kaarji had found a button that turned on some overhead lights. Still nothing happened.

By this time the other men had reached there. Conley was stammering, "Jim, we—we can't leave the supplies! The sleds!"

"Sleds be damned!" Jim exclaimed in an ecstasy of excitement. "This is better than a hundred sleds! Do you want to find your radite or don't you? Are you going to M'Tonak or not!"

Hesitantly, Conley entered the strange craft. The others glanced nervously, then quickly followed, as though not wishing to be left alone.

"I—" Conley began doubtfully.

That seemed to be a signal. Instantly a well-oiled metal door slid shut behind them. Motors began to purr gently beneath their feet. The car swung around in a great circle, and they were heading into the north.

From one of the comfortable pneumatic seats Jim watched the white unending landscape flashing past. He felt strangely exhilarated now that he was on the very threshold of his quest; for that they were being taken to the long-hidden, legendary city of M'Tonak, he did not for a moment doubt.

It had not yet occurred to him to wonder why they were being taken.

But of one thing he was sure. He said, turning to Conley:

"Why do you suppose they sent the car for us? It must be that they *know* whenever anyone is approaching M'Tonak!

Always! Other expeditions must have reached here in the same manner, else why were they never found by the men who came later?"

Conley nodded soberly. "And that must mean that, once inside M'Tonak, men are unable to leave."

IV

IT seemed minutes later, but it might have been hours, that Jim Landor sat up with a start, aware that the softly purring motors had lulled him to sleep. He wondered how long they had been travelling. Now their speed seemed to have diminished considerably.

But something else seemed strange.

He turned to the tiny window, and was startled to see no more Polar Cap, no more expanse of white ice. Instead they were in a strange dark place. It was several seconds before he could adjust his eyes sufficiently to see that a wall was very close. It seemed to be moving backward and slightly upward. He knew then that they were descending somewhere at about a thirty degree angle.

"When did this begin?" he asked, turning to Conley.

"About twenty minutes ago. We must be a mile below the ice by now."

So M'Tonak lay somewhere *beneath* the Polar Cap! That was why men in ages past had been unable to find it, until it became a legend on a par with Earth's lost Atlantis! Jim tensed in his seat now as he thought of all the conflicting reports he had heard about M'Tonak; vague questions crossed his mind to which there were only vaguer answers.

Now the passage though which they sped seemed to widen. Simultaneously they were in a sea of softly diffused, pale greenish light. This light increased as they went on, but did not become intense or glaring; rather it seemed to permeate the very atmosphere from some subtle, unknown source. Then, with breath-taking suddenness they burst out into a vast open place and looked upon the city of M'Tonak.

M'Tonak lay in the center of a vast, shallow bowl several miles wide. In the first start of amazement Jim thought they must have somehow emerged again

upon the planet's surface; but this thought was immediately discarded when he gazed across at the opposite horizon. It was concave rather than convex, which meant they were in a cavern of inconceivable dimensions. Far overhead he saw something vague and misty that must have been a roof. That soothing green light was everywhere but he still could not determine its source, it simply seemed to exist.

Now they were gliding gently down into the city which consisted of low-structured, white-marble buildings of peculiar architecture. Wide, empty avenues stretched away in a perfect geometric pattern.

"This city must be inconceivably old!" Conley gasped. "There's no other architecture like this anywhere on Mars!"

Their car was slowing now. It came to rest in a wide circular plaza. The door slid smoothly, invitingly open.

Jim glanced at the others who made no move to leave. He didn't blame them for not moving, for there was something strange and devilishly pre-arranged about all this.

"End of the line!" he said with a jocularity he did not feel. He moved to the door and stepped out.

Instantly he was aware of a strange difference. It might have been that alien green-tinged atmosphere, as if he had suddenly stepped into another dimension. Every fiber of his being now seemed to tingle in a peculiarly delightful way. It was very slight, scarcely felt, but there was no mistaking it.

As the others stepped out Jim looked at them closely. They felt it too, he noticed—especially Kaarji. Kaarji's usually dark and expressionless face was now alight with a feverish excitement.

They looked at the radiating streets about them. All were utterly empty, eerily silent.

"Where in blazes," muttered Conley, "is the welcoming committee? We were brought here, but why? Surely the place isn't uninhabited!"

"It isn't!" Jim said in that instant. "Look. Here comes your welcoming committee!" There was a peculiar note, almost a shrillness of disbelief in his voice.

The others whirled, their combined gaze

following his pointing finger across to the opposite side of the plaza.

TOWARD them slowly came a single lone figure. It was a Martian, of that there could be no doubt; but a Martian inconceivably old! He was stooped and withered, he leaned heavily on a stout cane, but he moved forward briskly for all of that. There was a certain purposefulness about him.

He stopped before them, and leaned forward with both hands on top of his cane. His chin almost rested on his hands as he peered around at them. None of the men moved or spoke. Jim, who was nearest, was fascinated by that grayish leathery face criss-crossed with thousands of tiny lines, in which were set, like jewels, four unwinking black eyes incongruously bright and alert with cunning. There was an uncanny aura of evil about this bent little Martian, an evil made audible as he spoke:

"There are only four of you—and one Martian. Strange, I thought there were more. But it is all right. Four Earthmen, intelligent Earthmen too. Earthmen are always welcome here."

He pointedly ignored Kaarji and turned his eyes upon Jim. Then he chuckled, as though with secret glee. It was a dry metallic wheeze that reminded Jim of an empty rocket tube when the fuel is burned out. Jim was glad of the comfortable weight of his electro-pistol in his pocket.

"My name is Jim Landor," he said. "Who are you, and why were we brought here? Did you have anything to do with it?"

The old Martian gave a quirk of a smile as if faintly amused by Jim's impetuosity. But he answered the questions promptly and in order.

"My name? It is Bhruulo. Here I am the Overseer—the Co-ordinator—call it what you will. As to why you were brought here, did you not seek M'Tonak, as have innumerable men in ages past? Now you have attained M'Tonak, and you should thank me. Yes, it was I who sent the surface car for you. I send it for all men who come far into the Polar Cap."

"You still haven't explained why we were brought here."

"That," Bhruulo said with a tinge of sarcasm, "I am sure you will learn from the others far better than you could from me."

"Then there are *others* here!"

"Yes, there are others. You need not fear, you are free to come and go here as you please. I give you—M'Tonak! But you will excuse me now, I must leave you. I am sure you will find—the others." With that, the old Martian whirled upon his cane and hurried across the plaza in the direction whence he had come.

"**W**AIT a minute, lad," Conley put out a restraining hand as Jim leaped forward. "Let him play his game for the time being. Let's see where his hangout is, so we can find him later."

They watched as Bhruulo, without a backward glance, entered a columnaded building that was different from the others by reason of its imposing height. Jim nodded and decided to remember that building.

"Now, Jim, let's find those others he speaks of. There are other Earthmen here, I'm convinced of it now." Conley had begun to lose his skepticism of M'Tonak—now that he had found it!—and his eyes were agleam with a growing excitement.

But search as they would, they saw no other occupants. They traversed streets that were dead and empty and silent. That palely diffused greenish radiance was everywhere, coloring all with a ghostly brightness. For several hours they explored, wandering far from that central plaza.

Kaarji stayed very close to Jim now, his original excitement having faded; indeed he seemed appalled, if not a little frightened, as he stared around in the abysmal stillness, and several times Jim noticed the Martian pass his hand in a puzzled manner across his brow.

Wessel's mien brightened, as he watched the needle of his radite-finder gyrating wildly as if at any moment it would jump its bearings.

"It must mean we're now in the very center of the main deposit!" he exclaimed. "If only we—"

It was then they saw the figure of an Earthman emerge from a building hardly

fifty yards away. He saw them at the same time. He turned quickly indoors again, and shouted something that sounded like: "New arrivals!"

Then three other men emerged, and they all walked toward the little group of five.

"**W**E'RE friendly," one of them said as they neared, and Jim's hand fell away from his weapon. "Because we have to be, here. Hmmm. When did *you* arrive?"

"A few hours ago."

"Uh-huh. And you met the funny little man, I suppose?"

"If you mean Bhruulo," Conley said with a grimace, "we sure did! Is he head man here?"

"More about that later. My name's Spurlin. Ross, Fleming, Adams," he introduced the others.

Jim was staring at the speaker, a huge man with a purposeful set to his unshaven jaw. "Then you're Gregg Spurlin, who headed the scientific expedition three years ago in the search for M'Tonak!"

"And found it, as you can see. Found it too damn well. But we weren't the first. What about you?"

Briefly, Jim told of their trek, and of his search for his brother. "What about him?" he said in imitation of Spurlin's own brusqueness. "Frank Landor. He should have arrived here weeks ago, unless—"

He stopped there, looking from one to the other. The men were looking uncomfortably at each other.

"No Frank Landor ever showed up here," Adams said.

Fleming nodded agreement, a little too hurriedly, Jim thought, and none of the men would look directly at him.

"They're lying to you," Spurlin said. "You might as well know the truth; but before I tell you about it let's get back inside, out of this green hell."

He led the way back into the building whence they had emerged. But once inside they did not stop. The greenish radiance penetrated even there. They hurried over to a wide metal door that slid silently open when Spurlin pressed a hidden button. Revealed to their gaze

was a dark narrow tunnel, leading downward.

"What about the Martian?" Ross said, addressing Spurlin.

"He goes along!" Jim snapped, and Kaarji looked at him gratefully.

"All right," Spurlin murmured softly. "No harm if he comes. But I don't think he'll last long, no Martian ever does in this city."

If Kaarji heard the words he did not show it, as he followed Jim into the tunnel.

"About your brother," Spurlin spoke brusquely out of the darkness as they moved along. "Yes, he arrived here all right. For a while, Frank Landor was with our secret little group down here below. But—there's something about that greenish atmosphere, something exhilarating but also deadly, in a very subtle and insidious way. Sometimes it increases, penetrates even down to us, through walls and things. But there are some men who—"

"Yes, I know," Jim's voice was as dead as the hope within him. "Frank was one of those men. He couldn't stay cooped up here. He was curious, he had to find out—things, and the reason for things. That what you're trying to tell me?"

"That's about it. Like others who have come here he had to go up into the city, searching, trying to solve its secret. Every day he and a few others went up. Always they returned to us here, exhausted, until one day—they just didn't come back."

In silence they continued along the winding passage. Jim was thinking of his brother now, with a dawning realization that he would probably never again see him alive. He was thinking of other things too. Of that menacing greenness in the city above. Of Spurlin who seemed so calloused and unconcerned. Of the legendary emerald of M'Tonak, the lure for countless men in ages past.

SPURLIN'S voice shattered the silence. "Here we are." Now he was flashing a tiny light upon a massive metal door. And Jim's heart leaped, for he saw it as a metal new, and yet not new to him. It was the same dull, greenish-gray metal as the piece Kaarji had given him. Jim passed

his fingers lightly across it to make sure, but said nothing.

For more than any of these things he was thinking of a bent and shrivelled old Martian named Bhruulo, who had chuckled with a secret evil glee.

The door swung ponderously open. They stepped into a huge oval room, and many men came hurrying toward them. The walls of this room, Jim noticed, were of the same peculiar metal.

"Introductions later," Spurlin said, as the men came crowding around. "Right now I want you newcomers to see the work we're engaged in here. You look like the sort who can help us in the job."

He led them to another room where a long, skeletal shape was under construction. It rested on curved cradles, pointing upward. Only a few outer plates had as yet been put into place, plates of the same strange metal Jim identified with everything here.

"A space-ship!" he exclaimed unbelievably. "But—why a spacer here, so far beneath Mars' surface?"

"A spacer it is, Jim Landor. One such as you never saw before, and it's being built under conditions such as you cannot imagine. We have to mine and fashion the metal in the few tiny furnaces we have here, and it's inconceivably slow due to the scarcity and crudeness of tools. We've been at work on this one spacer for three years.

"As for this new metal, it's to be found here in huge deposits. In some ways it's like radite, it might even *be* radite, strangely changed through the centuries by those peculiar green radiations. Anyway, it's amazingly light and tough, almost expansive under fuel pressure and it's going to revolutionize spacer construction if we can only get any from here and make it known!"

"But how, man? How do you propose—"

"To get the spacer out of here?" Spurlin smiled confidently. "In one super blast we're going to hurl through this roof to the city above, and through *that* cavern roof onto the surface of Mars. I'm fully convinced this metal is capable of withstanding it. We're building a double hull. And we have enough fuel hoarded here

to take us clear to Earth if we wish."

Jim nodded, but he was not enthusiastic. "How long, do you think, before you finish it?"

"Perhaps only another month now! The ore's damnably hard to get out, and we can only stay up there on the surface a few hours at a time—but with the added help of you new men. . . ."

"**W**E'RE with you to the finish!" Conley exclaimed, and the others nodded enthusiastically. Wessel, especially, had listened with an eager intentness to Spurlin's description of the new metal. Wessel had come seeking new radite deposits, and had stumbled upon something vast beyond his fondest dreams! Even his loyalty to TRI-PLANETARY MINING was fast beginning to waver.

"What I want to know," Jim voiced the thought uppermost in his mind, "is the status of that little old Martian, Bhruulo."

Spurlin frowned. "No one seems to have found out, and most of us don't care. He's incredibly old, of course. He seems to have been here always. In some strange manner, he seems to know when men come into the Polar Cap, and he always sends that surface vehicle out for them. However, he completely ignores us here. I'm not even sure that he knows we're working on this spaceship! We try to keep out of his sight, and I've personally not seen him more than twice in the past year."

"But isn't it incredible that in three years he hasn't found out or guessed what you are doing?"

"Not so incredible. We don't know what he's doing. We leave him alone and he leaves us alone."

"But," Jim exclaimed unbelievably, "he brought you here, and you're not even curious to know why?"

"Let me remind you that certain men have been curious—and they have disappeared. Anyway our sole purpose now is in completing the spacer for our escape."

Jim gestured disdainfully. "And you, Spurlin—you once claimed to be a scientist! You have not even the scientific mind—"

"One's mind," Spurlin interrupted softly, "somehow, does not seem to be the same after three years in this place."

"All right. But before I leave here

I'm going to find out what Bhruulo's purpose is! I don't like the way that old Martian grinned at me. He's got something up his sleeve, and I think you men'll find it out too late."

Spurlin smiled sadly. "All right, Jim Landor. Each man is his own boss here. At least I wish you would accompany a few of us tomorrow. We're getting more of the metal out, and trying to determine the proper spot to blast through with our spacer. You'll become more acquainted with the city and the general terrain, and maybe it'll change your mind."

"Sure, I'll go," Jim agreed. But he didn't think it would change his mind. He had wanted to find M'Tonak, here he was in M'Tonak and he was going to solve the mystery of M'Tonak. More than that, he was going to learn once and for all what had happened to his brother.

V

THE following day a dozen men ventured up into the city. Spurlin seemed disappointed as they stepped out into the street from their secret building. "Not an ideal day for it," he commented gruffly. And at Jim's querulous look, he explained, "Those emanations seem stronger today. I give us only two or three hours, at the most."

They went into the rocky terrain beyond the city, toward the near horizon where the cave roof tapered down. That was hardly a mile away. Jim found it hard to believe that over their heads was the Polar Cap, vast and desolate. Glancing up, he barely made out the dim contour of their roof; and it suddenly occurred to him to wonder what sustained it, why it didn't collapse under that tremendous pressure of rock and ice!

He knew why, only a minute later. There came a sudden, smooth hum in his ears. The very air around them seemed surcharged with energy, or rather all energy seemed to be rushing away from them!

"This way!" Spurlin exclaimed, making a hasty detour from the spot. Barely a hundred yards away Jim could discern a vague swirling mistiness, in the form of a huge column that reached up to touch the roof. Suddenly, he knew what it was,

knew also that it would be death for any man who ventured too close.

"Ionization zone." Spurlin voiced Jim's own thoughts as they hurried in the detour. "An electronic tower of strength! There are usually six of them in a straight line across this cave, but once in a while new ones spring up out of nowhere. I think Bhrulo controls them."

Jim nodded uncomfortably, and tried not to think what would happen if all those electronic zones failed, with millions of tons of ice above them.

They reached their objective at last. Tunnels were in evidence where the men had been taking out the ore. They resumed work at once, but it was slow and heart-breaking. Their tools were crude, and the ore was the most difficult Jim had ever handled.

Wessel worked harder than any of them, his eyes agleam with a new excitement. "Look at that stuff," he said once to Conley. "Over fifty per cent pure content, most of it!"

It was perhaps an hour later when Spurlin called a halt. "Enough for today. We'll try again tomorrow."

Jim didn't need to ask why they must stop. Already he felt that strange tingling in every fiber of his being, which increased as the minutes passed, and he knew that here was a dangerous thing.

"We have so little time in which to work up here," Spurlin said as they hurried back. "Do you see now, Jim Landor, why it's taken us close to three years?"

Jim saw, indeed. Within him there surged a vast admiration for these men who had persevered in the face of almost insurmountable difficulties, to build their spaceship from the barest resources around them.

Yet close upon this there leaped to Jim's mind another thought, unannounced and without reason. It was simply a feeling that there was something *vastly, terribly wrong with what these men were doing!* It was more than a feeling, it was a certainty! It didn't make sense—that they shouldn't escape from M'Tonak—but now Jim knew it!

Before he could think long upon it, however, they had come in sight of their building and Jim saw a familiar

figure emerge. It was Kaarji, but there seemed something vaguely wrong with him. He looked in their direction but seemed not to see them at all, as he turned and walked away with a long, purposeful stride.

Something struck another ominous note in Jim's brain. The men reached their building and entered it, but he did not stop. He hurried after Kaarji.

"Landor! You damn fool, come back here!" Spurlin cried after him.

But Jim waved a hand, not looking back. He hurried after the Martian. Those emanations were almost unbearable now, but he didn't seem to mind. There was something ominous about them, but something else as well that he could not resist.

He had miscalculated Kaarji's distance, however, because somewhere in the maze of streets he lost him. But he knew where the Martian was going—where they were both going. Hours later it seemed, but could only have been minutes, when he came in sight of the imposing edifice where he had last seen Bhrulo disappear.

NOW he hesitated. His mind was crystal clear, clearer than he had ever known it before. But somehow it did not seem to be his own. He struggled a little, but the result was inevitable, he seemed to know it. He gave up almost voluntarily. He continued toward the building and entered its portals that were open wide and waiting.

He faced a long, greenish-gloomy corridor of marble. With hardly a pause he continued along it. Tall imposing doors, tightly closed, were on either side of him, but he gave little heed to them. The corridor turned sharply once, and then again, and then it seemed to lead a little downward. Jim could not be sure. He only knew that he was being led *somewhere*, that he was to face something. A cold fear caught his brain, but he could only go on.

Now the corridor walls seemed to waver, seemed to swim beneath a sort of radiance. But it was a glaucous radiance, ineffably green as the light beneath the waters of a shallow sea. It increased in intensity, however, as he went on. It became almost tangible, it beat against him, it seemed to pluck with evil intentness at the fibers of

his mind. Jim laughed once, laughed wildly, but did not pause in his stride.

The corridor made one more turn and then he was walking into a light so blinding that it staggered him momentarily. It flared up once in a great greenish effulgence, then died down into a steady pulsation. Now, Jim knew, he must be approaching the very source of that all-pervading light which had so puzzled him since his arrival at M'Tonak.

But now he had a vaguely uncomfortable feeling. It was as though a million eyes were watching him, observing every move. It was as though a million tiny fingers were tearing away the shreds of his mind with secret, silent amusement. Jim did not look about him as he walked on, for he knew no one was there. It had something to do with this light, that much he knew.

Now he could see the end of the corridor through the pulsing greenish haze. Something seemed to be there, something towering and opalescent—and waiting.

He came very near before he saw what it was, a huge circular glass-enclosed well that towered up to the ceiling fifty feet above. It was from this well that the light came. Jim could see the gentle pulsing of it, with streamers of a darker color flashing through it vertically.

Those millions of eyes now were very near. Those millions of fingers probed into his brain unbearably. Jim pressed his hands to his throbbing temples, but the pain continued to expand within his skull. He could not turn and flee, for something held him there. He tried to cry out against it, but his throat seemed to contract and no sound would emerge.

He had no knowledge whether it was minutes or hours that he stood there; but when at last he felt his legs giving way beneath him, and glimpsed the blur of the floor rushing up, it was with a profound sense of gratitude for the oblivion that would be his.

BUT this was not to be. No sooner did he feel the floor beneath him, than the force which had beaten him down partially withdrew. Jim staggered to his feet, weak and a little dazed. Now something else was happening behind that glassite-encased well. The green pillar of

light was lowering, coalescing upon itself with a slowly swirling motion.

And then, as the tower of light lessened, Jim saw what rode atop it. He saw a shape, huge, iridescent and apparently weightless. It seemed at first simply a larger area of greenish light, but for a single second he glimpsed more. He saw the massive core of it. He felt his stomach turning over in a prodigious yawn, and his brain churned in chaotic horror.

The thing he saw was a roughly globular, quasi-amorphous shape that was in a state of constant fluxion. It was partly tentacular, it writhed and pulsed, it seemed to project itself at will. Darkish tendrils came uncurling from it as if it were reaching for something not quite attainable. Simultaneously it spun slowly atop its pillar of light which seemed also a part of itself, somehow. *It was alive, a thinking, intelligent entity.* That much Jim knew. It would even have been an entity of beauty, with its whirling greenish effulgence, were it not for one thing.

It was evil. Terribly, undeniably so. Jim could feel the impact of it almost physically. Almost he felt that here was the essence of all the evil of another universe, compressed into that one horribly writhing mass that was now trying to expend itself but could not. And he had the feeling that although it could be moved to terrible, devastating anger, it was now for some reason gleeful.

It came riding down, light as a feather atop its light, until it hovered just a few feet above Jim's head. Jim knew that he was being examined microscopically, perhaps even fourth-dimensionally. He shivered a little. He tried to take a step back but could not. There came a sudden chuckling within his own brain, and then mentally he heard the entity speak.

"Yes, Earthman, you were right in your estimate of me. I am 'evil' to such as you. At least that is what Bhrulo tells me, and I have come to believe Bhrulo."

Jim crouched before the thing, staring up at it. He still felt its probing mental fingers in his mind, and the fingers were . . . *unclean*. He spoke aloud at last, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"What—what in heaven's name are you?"

THERE came that chuckling note again, as the thing spoke.

"Whatever I am, Earthman, it is not in heaven's name. I do not exactly know myself what I am. I personally have no conception or remembrance of how I came here. I only know what Bhruulo has told me. It pleases me to tell you."

The mental voice ceased abruptly. Then sudden, vivid pictures flashed stereoptically across Jim's brain and were as quickly gone. He saw a city he recognized as M'Tonak, and the city was teeming with people. Jim knew that must have been many, many years ago.

The scene changed. As through another's eyes, he caught a blurry vision of this evil entity flashing from out of the sky to land near the city. He felt some of the consternation and then horror as the populace died by the score in the streets. There was no apparent reason except the presence of the alien thing. Just to look at the blinding brilliance of it was to die. Jim caught confused pictures of all available weapons being rushed to the scene to do battle with the thing, but to no avail; as the M'Tonakians died, the entity grew tremendous in proportions and in power.

These pictures flashed away and Jim saw others; the last few scientists of M'Tonak, in a barricaded place where they worked frantically on a weapon with which to battle the alien thing. They completed the weapon but they could not destroy the entity. After a terrific struggle they subdued it temporarily by means of certain rays and beams. In this manner they at last brought it into captivity within the glassite well.

"Bhruulo says all this happened hundreds of years ago," the voice came again within Jim's brain. "He is the last of that final group of scientists who subdued me. I have only a vague remembrance—"

"Bhruulo says!" Jim gasped, struggling with the significance of the idea.

He looked up and saw the spherish, effulgent thing spinning with silent amusement. "Is Bhruulo's longevity, then, such an unusual thing? I do not know. Your time-scheme means little to me. Perhaps Bhruulo's great age is due to his perpetual proximity to me. I only know that, unlike

other Martians and Earthmen, he is immune to my strongest powers now."

Jim sensed a certain bitterness in that mental voice, almost a hatred for Bhruulo. Looking up at the greenish, brooding globe, Jim ventured a daring question.

"Don't you sometimes long to be—free again?"

He felt the tendril-fingers grasp his mind again with a fierce tenacity. He cried out against the physical pain of it, but even through the pain he heard the throbbing answer.

"Free! Yes, Earthman! Bhruulo glories that he has me trapped here. Often I remember those olden days when I almost conquered the city of M'Tonak and the planet Mars! Bhruulo has promised me those days again, and much more. He says he is preparing for it, but I do not know what he means. I only know that I tire of waiting!"

There were more mental words, but Jim only heard them through a mist about his brain. He knew that here, at last, he had solved the mystery of M'Tonak! This evil entity from out of another universe or another dimension was the "emeralds" of M'Tonak which had lured men up here in ages past for its own, or Bhruulo's, devilish purpose. But what was that purpose? Something vastly imminent, Jim knew! Perhaps it was something the entity even now was trying to tell him in its strangely confidential mood.

"THAT is enough. You have said this!"

That was not the thing's mental voice! Jim knew it, even as he whirled to face Bhruulo who had come from nowhere to stand behind him. Bhruulo was furious. His grayish, lined face was a mask of hate—but not for Jim. He hurried forward like a scuttling crab, supporting himself on his cane with both hands. He approached the glassite barrier, and began to manipulate tiny wheels there which Jim had not noticed before. A network of wiring led down to several complicated box-like affairs set in the floor.

Then a very curious thing happened. If a writhing, pulsing, spinning globe of evil can cower, that is what the entity did! No sooner had Bhruulo's hands touched

the wheels, than the entity sank down to the floor, then darted frightenedly up again, to cringe against the furthestmost confines of its prison. It poised there, hesitant, as if watching Bhruulo. It ventured out from the wall and then back again. It hardly pulsed at all now, as if holding its breath in fear.

A tiny hum came from the machinery Bhruulo was manipulating. It rose to a shrill whine and then passed beyond the audible. A sudden criss-cross of pencil-thin beams leaped about the confines of the well. They were pale, scarcely visible, but Jim sensed the power of them. He heard a mental shriek of agony from the spinning globe, then it was tumbling up the sides of the well, out of range. It vanished fifty feet overhead, in a haze of greenish light.

Using his cane as a pivot, Bhruulo pirouetted slowly to face Jim.

"Now," he said, "we can talk to each other without interruption from that thing. Too bad that it hates me and I hate it. For we need each other."

"I do not know," Bhruulo continued, "how much the Dim-Ing told you of itself or of me and my plans. It does not particularly matter, now."

"Dim-Ing?" Jim repeated querulously, trying to focus his mind again.

"Yes. 'Dimensional-Thing.' Facetious? I have my moments of humor. It has only a dim remembrance of its past before it came to Mars; but through certain conversation with it I have come to the conclusion that it somehow had birth in another dimension impinging delicately upon ours. How or why it was flung across to us we shall never know. But it is nearly finished on Mars."

Something caught at Jim's brain. He started a little.

Bhruulo laughed shrilly.

"YES. Had you not guessed before? The Dim-Ing feeds upon the minds of men. Oh, very subtly, of course. But for the presence of such sustenance on Mars it would have died long, long ago. At first the accumulative mental sustenance of Mars was more than sufficient. I was careful to keep the Dim-Ing under my control, even as now. But as the years passed—more years than you think, Earth-

man—I saw what was happening. *We were hastening the eventual decease of the Martian race!* The Dim-Ing absorbed, at first, all evil from the total Martian mind. And then—even more.

"No doubt, Earthman, you have read something of Martian history. You will remember that several centuries ago a frightful war raged across three major continents of Mars. Almost abruptly, that is to say within the space of a few years, it ceased mutually and without apparent reason! It was the Dim-Ing and I who indirectly caused that. Then, you will remember, there came an almost Utopian state for something like a few score of years. It quickly passed as the Dim-Ing sent out its subtle radiations almost desperately, across the surface of Mars. The Martians became the inactive, indolent, dying race you see now. In the last few scores of years, sustenance for the Dim-Ing has been meager indeed."

Jim only stared at this Martian who according to the entity was hundreds of years old. A horror crept into Jim's brain, and a subtle warning. Here, he knew, was the one to be guarded against. Here in this bent little Martian was the ultimate evil. His was the controlling hand.

JIM had been listening in a slowly dawning horror. Now he found his voice at last, as he took a single tense step toward Bhruulo.

"And you—you tell me this! This thing that has been happening to the Martian race! You, yourself a Martian—"

Bhruulo did not move and the expression on his face did not change.

"It is not what I am, or once was, that matters. It is what I *shall* be. With the tool that I have now, immortality lies within my grasp. That, and eternal power. I shall continue.

"Within the last fifty years, you Earthmen came. I need not say that you were a Godsend. The Dim-Ing was at a very low ebb indeed.

"Even at the height of their scientific accomplishments the Martians never quite achieved space travel. By what miracle you Earthmen achieved it shall always remain a mystery to me. But I thank you. You came when I needed you most.

"I discovered that your Earthian minds

are stubborn, very stubborn indeed. The Dim-Ing likes that. It can subsist much longer on an Earthian mind than on a Martian. Furthermore, I learned that the Earthian mind is curious—one of the inherent qualities of your race. Therefore, I embellished somewhat the existing legend of M'Tonak. And you all came searching greedily; if not in droves, at least, in sufficient numbers.

"And now you are building a space-ship for me. I have known it all along! I have brought you here for that purpose! I know it is very near completion, this space-ship which shall carry, not Earthmen back to Earth, but the Dim-Ing and myself."

"But it shall not!" Jim had let Bhrulo talk on, knowing what was coming. In his mind now was no room for horror; his mind was quickly alert and his hand was even quicker, as it flashed to the electro-pistol in his belt.

But Bhrulo made a motion too, so fast that, paradoxically, there was a certain casualness about it. He still smiled. He raised his cane on which he had been leaning with both hands. From a lens-covered bore in the end of it came a thick whitish light, touching Jim's hand and holding it motionless. It expanded, enveloped all of his body so that he could not move.

It surged a little upward, full into his face.

Jim Landor crumpled noiselessly and lay still.

VI

HIS mind came surging slowly back up from the dark depths of nightmare. His head ached unbearably. He had thought an insistent, warning voice was crying out at him. He opened his eyes. This was no nightmare, for memory came back in a rushing flood, and he still heard the voice, low and warning and very close to his ear.

"Do not move, Jim Landor. Do not say anything, just listen. This is Kaarji, I am here close by you."

Kaarji! Jim had almost forgotten about Kaarji. Then he took the warning and tried not even to think, he just listened, in a detached manner.

"We are in a room off the corridor. That Dim-Ing thing is only a few hundred

feet away. I hope it has not contacted your mind again, for I have something important to tell you. It is a good thing you followed me here so closely, for the Dim-Ing withdrew its concentration from me and centered it on you. Thus I was able to slip past this place, and I explored a little. Jim Landor, below these corridors I have discovered a huge room full of machinery. I cannot understand it all, for I have not a scientific mind; but I thought if we could escape from here, and I could take you to this place—"

Slowly, Jim allowed his mind to relax. He felt no more of the probing mental fingers in his brain.

"It's all right, Kaarji, we can speak freely now. I suppose that's where Bhrulo caught you, in that secret room?"

"Yes. It seems to be his living quarters as well."

"I think I know what that machinery is, Kaarji. It's vital to the existence of M'Tonak. If only we can get back there—"

Jim rose to his feet and looked about the room. It was small and empty, the walls were of marble. He walked over to the single door leading to the corridor. He tried it, and to his surprise it opened easily!

BUT he staggered back as from a violent physical blow, as the radiations from the Dim-Ing lashed against him.

"Hum, our little playmate again." Jim rubbed his half-blinded eyes. "Clever devil, that Bhrulo. He knows that no man could escape through *that*. He was so sure of it that he didn't even remove my electro-pistol from me."

As the pain passed from his eyes, he removed his pistol and felt the comfortable weight of it in his hand; but he thrust it back into his belt again, knowing it was useless against the Dim-Ing. Then an idea struck him like a thunderbolt.

"Kaarji, we may walk from this room yet! I have one weapon that Bhrulo hasn't counted on, and that is—the Dim-Ing's hatred of Bhrulo!"

Hurrying to the door again, he opened it infinitesimally. And he leaped back to the furthestmost confines of the room as the Dim-Ing's thought-emanations came flooding inside, in a gentle greenish haze.

Jim centered all of his mind, now, on the one all-important thought. "Bhrulo! I

shall kill him! He thinks he will keep me here and feed my mind to the Dim-Ing—but somehow I'll escape from here and kill Bhruulo. I swear it!" He strove to arouse an overwhelming hatred in his mind for the ages-old little Martian.

The Dim-Ing's power surged anew.

He felt the alien entity's mental fingers grab hold of his mind again. He stifled the rising exultance and reiterated his resolution to kill Bhruulo. Now he noticed that the Dim-Ing's mental presence was expanding through the very marble walls themselves. As never before, he began to appreciate the potential power of the thing. But with an effort he repeated his oath to kill Bhruulo; it became now not so much an oath as a promise, for he knew the Dim-Ing had tightly grasped his mind and was listening.

It was easy. So ridiculously easy that Jim should have been suspicious, but was not.

"If you mean it," the Dim-Ing spoke to Jim's mind at last. "If I thought you really would—"

"I mean it!" Jim flashed the thought fervently. "Let me out of here and I will rid you of Bhruulo, once and for all!"

He almost laughed aloud.

Slowly, hesitantly the thing's mental barrier was fading away. Jim stepped to the door and opened it widely. Nothing beat him back now. He motioned to Kaarji, who followed him almost frightenedly out into the corridor. There the mental power of the Dim-Ing was a little more in evidence, but not enough to stop them. It was as though it were watching. . . .

"This way," Kaarji breathed at last. He led Jim in the opposite direction from the Dim-Ing, then into a cross-corridor that extended interminably. At last they reached a door that opened onto stone steps leading downward.

"Careful," Kaarji warned as he led the way slowly.

He didn't need to warn Jim. The latter was wary as never before, and he kept a hand always near his electro-pistol. Something was vaguely wrong about all this but he didn't know what. For one thing it seemed too easy.

At the bottom of the steps was another sliding door. Kaarji paused before it and whispered, "This is the room!"

JIM stood still, listening. There was no sound from beyond that door. The silence was a vast womb about them, menacing. Jim slid the door noiselessly open; they stepped inside and stared around.

They saw huge circling tiers of peculiarly constructed dynamos. They were in operation, Jim knew that, for he could feel a certain surge of power even though there was no sound. A bewildering network of cables led from the dynamos to a central, predominating machine that towered fanlike above them all. It was this electronic tower, he knew, that created the swirling pillars of strength that surged upward and outward to support the vast cavern roof overhead.

Then they saw Bhruulo. He was in a little glassite room at the foot of the electronic tower. Tiny wheels and dials were banked around him, and he was busy making delicate adjustments. So busy that he didn't see them standing just inside the door.

Now Jim heard the insistent voice of the Dim-Ing in his mind again: "Kill him! Do it at once! Do as you promised. . . ."

Jim didn't need the prompting voice, but he wasn't going to ray a man down from behind; besides, he doubted if his beam would penetrate that glassite cage. He stepped quickly to one of the dynamo stanchions, and drew Kaarji down beside him.

He waited, despite the Dim-Ing's impatience that he could feel seething within him. Bhruulo finished his adjustments at last, and stepped out of the cage. He was still a good fifty feet from Jim. He turned, to go deeper into the maze of machinery.

Jim arose and said quietly: "Bhruulo!"

The aged Martian whirled with amazing agility. Jim saw the look of incredulity that leaped into his eyes. Bhruulo leaned heavily forward, his two hands gnarling about his cane. Then his lips quirked into a toothless smile, and he started to say something.

That was to throw Jim off guard. Simultaneous with his speech he lifted his hands lightning-like, and the cane levelled. But Jim was expecting that. With a single sinuous movement his pistol was in his hand, its bluish beam was pencilling out. It caught Bhruulo squarely in the chest before he could press the button on his own weapon. He staggered forward, his

cane-weapon sagged; he tried to level it again but could not. Still he staggered forward, hatred mingled with horror in his eyes. With amazing strength his spindly legs carried him across the room, as he mouthed unintelligible Martian words.

Jim fell back a step. He hoped Bhrulo would not find strength in his arms. Would that damned Martian never die? Jim knew his beam had bored a hole clear through the creature's chest; he could see the blackish blood oozing from it. Jim felt a cold horror gnawing at the pit of his stomach even as he aimed carefully and the electro-beam flashed out three more times. He saw three more holes rake across the Martian's chest.

Bhrulo fell with a crash right at Jim's feet, and the cane clattered from his fingers. Even the mask of death could not erase the hate from those ebony eyes as Bhrulo stared lifelessly up at him.

Jim shuddered once, then reached out with his foot and turned Bhrulo over so that he lay face downward.

HE was aware of Kaarji standing beside him, and Kaarji saying quickly, tensely: "Jim Landor! You remember when I said that this time I should not return from the Polar wastes? This is what I meant, I know now what I must do. But you must hurry, get back and tell the other men, or none of you will ever leave M'Tonak!"

Jim stared at him uncomprehendingly, trying to listen at the same time to Kaarji and to the jubilant voice of the Dim-Ing that was surging in him again.

"Kaarji—what do you mean?"

"I mean, Jim Landor, that I know the intentions of the Dim-Ing! I know at last what has happened to my race and what might happen to Earth. But it shall not happen!"

Kaarji leaped toward the glassite cage at the foot of the electronic tower. In a few strides he was there, had hurled himself within it and barred the door behind him. His eyes were glowing and purposeful, as he stared out at Jim who came running.

"You had better hurry, Jim Landor, and warn the others. Do not try to stop me, for I have a feeling this cage is impregnable. In a very short time I can wreck

these controls, the electronic zones will cease and the entire cavern roof will collapse under the pressure of millions of tons! Get back to the others and escape from M'Tonak."

He turned deliberately and examined the controls banked around him. He reached to his pouch of *tsith* stems, and placed a few of them in his mouth before he continued.

"I suggest you try to distract the Dim-Ing's thought as much as possible, so it won't center on me here. I will try to hold out for half an hour at least, longer if possible. But hurry!"

Conflicting emotions swept across Jim like a flood, but were beaten down by the cold realization that Kaarji intended to carry this thing through without compromise. The Martian would destroy all of M'Tonak, including the Dim-Ing and himself, in an endeavor to save Earth from the thing that had happened so subtly on Mars.

Jim whirled, started to race away but turned back. "All-right, Kaarji. Thanks seems a pretty feeble word for what you are doing, but if I get back to Earth I shall see that you are never forgotten for this. Now give me the rest of those *tsith* stems—I have an idea!"

Without question Kaarji opened the glassite door, and tossed out the pouch of stems. Jim snatched it up and raced away without a backward glance. He hurried from the room and up the stone stairs to the corridors again.

THERE the Dim-Ing's power struck more forcefully into his mind. It seemed somehow diabolically gleeful now. But Jim hurried on, hurried toward the evil entity. Finally he stood at the foot of the towering well, and saw the spinning globular shape descend upon its coalescing pillar of light.

"You did it well," the thought came flashing. "You kept your promise. The thing I have dreamed of for ages has happened, Bhrulo is out of my way and I have a free hand! Yes, Earthman, now I see in your mind everything that Bhrulo told you. There are other Earthmen here, completing a huge ship by which to go back to your planet. That is what Bhrulo was counting on, that is what he would not

tell me. He had planned to take me to Earth and there keep me under his control, as he has here. But now that you have so kindly removed Bhrulo, I can do this by myself! I need only wait until the men have completed their ship, then blast their minds to annihilation!"

This Dim-Ing was the ultimate evil, not Bhrulo! Jim had known it all along, and now he realized how he had played into its hands! A momentary panic seized him. He could picture the thing landing the spaceship on Earth's northern or southern polar ice, or in the unexplored depths of Brazilian jungle. Hidden from the sight and knowledge of men for years, it would carry on the subtle destruction of Earthian minds as it had Martian; and now, unhampered by Bhrulo, it would grow in size and potency until who could say what the end would be! Perhaps there would be no end; there were other planets besides Mars and Earth. . . .

"Thank you, Earthman, that is a thought I will remember. But your mental pictures of the terrain of Earth were rather vague. Show me more clearly."

Jim felt the agonizing mental fingers tearing the tissues of his brain apart.

At the base of the well he saw the obscure little door Bhrulo had opened to manipulate the pale, pencilling beams. Instantly, Jim was on his knees, had wrenched it open. He did not try to work the beams, knowing the Dim-Ing could have stopped him in an instant; he merely tossed the pouch of *tsith* stems out into the center floor of the well, and rose quickly.

"There's an offering for you! I kept my promise and killed Bhrulo, now you keep yours and let me go!"

The entity had made no such promise and Jim knew it. But he whirled and raced down the corridor unheeded. It was only the element of surprise that would carry him through now, surprise and utter wildness. He even laughed wildly aloud as he ran on. And nothing stopped him!

Nothing stopped him until he was halfway to the outer door leading to the street. Then he felt a terrific impact, he stumbled, fell to his knees and toppled forward on his face. He arose against a tremendous physical pressure and staggered on. Again he felt that impact, as he was battered against the marble corridor walls. But with

a fierce tenacity he kept his feet, and kept going.

He reached the street. His legs were heavy as if he were fighting against a hundred gravities. He felt that the Dim-Ing was merely toying with him, as a cat with a mouse. As Jim hurried on, or tried to hurry, to the place where he would find Conley and Spurlin and the score of other men, he knew that one man could not hope to stand against that awful power. But perhaps many men, in perfect mental accord. . . .

Again he felt the strange, fierce tingling in every fiber of his being until he thought he was walking in a sluggish sea of fire. It seemed hours later when he reached the familiar building and hurried along the metal-lined tunnel where the Dim-Ing's radiations seemed a little less intense. It was with a feeling of profound gratitude that he pushed through a final door, and sank down into a soothing oblivion. But not before he glimpsed many men rushing toward him, with surprised shouts. Among them he saw Conley.

VII

JIM opened his eyes and stared up into Conley's worried face. He coughed a little on the stinging liquor the latter was pouring down his throat.

"How long have I been here?" he asked urgently.

"Just a minute or two, lad. You're mighty battered and tired, but you'll be all right now. Just rest a while."

"Rest!" Jim repeated, and climbed quickly to his feet. "None of us can rest now—there's no time! It may be too late already—but we've got to make a fight for it, if for no other reason than because Kaarji's counting on it! No, Conley, I'm not delirious." He waved the worried Irishman away. "Listen, you men! I've solved the mystery of M'Tonak, and we've got to get out of here!"

In an anxious rush of words he explained the situation, told briefly of his discovery of the Dim-Ing and what it was, and of Kaarji's avowal to destroy all of M'Tonak.

"In another few weeks, Spurlin, your spaceship would have been finished, and the greatest horror the universe has ever

known would have launched itself upon Earth! It still might happen! *We've got to get back out there at once, en masse, and hold that thing's attention before it discovers what Kaarji's up to!*"

It had all happened too suddenly for the men to quite believe him. They looked askance at each other.

"But after three years of heart-breaking work," Spurlin said, "to give up my spaceship now! That's what you're asking."

"A hell of a lot of good your spaceship will be, with millions of tons of rock and ice heaped on it! That's gonna happen about fifteen minutes from now, or less! Man, don't you understand? Kaarji said he'd give me a half-hour—"

"It's a trick!" Wessel squawked loudly. "Damned funny that he ever got back here to us at all! He's discovered a protection against those greenish rays, he's trying to lure us all outside to our death, so he can have all this new metal for himself!"

Jim strode back to the door, pausing only long enough to cry, "All right, stay here, then, and die. All of you! If you won't help me, that means our last chance is gone. I'll die too, but it'll be out there fighting that thing to the last!"

"I'm with you, Jim. I believe you." It was Conley's voice he heard and Conley's friendly hand on his shoulder, but he didn't pause in his hurried stride back up through the tunnel. He heard other men coming behind them, following Conley's example, but he felt that it was too late now. There could only be a few minutes left.

Kaarji might even be dead. The Dim-Ing in its subtle way might have known the plot from the first. That would mean the Dim-Ing had won, for no man could ever be able to get back down to that control room.

As they reached the street, Jim felt the power of the entity withdraw a little, as if that were necessary in order for it to embrace all their minds. A sudden new hope surged in Jim, a feeling that their combined forces might be a match for this thing yet! And even as they were racing back toward the central plaza, he was evolving a plan that might work providing they had enough time.

"Spurlin! You remember that surface car that brought us all here at various times? Do you suppose you might dis-

cover its secret? There are hidden electronic motors, I believe."

"We thought of that before, but no man was ever able to get near enough—"

"You'll get there this time, we'll see to it! Spurlin, when we reach the plaza you take one man and head for that car. You spent three years building a spaceship, but now in as many minutes you've got a tougher job—you've got to find those motors and solve them and have them ready for a quick departure!"

"The rest of you men, listen. I've had a few dealings with this Dim-Ing and I think I know its weakness. It's grossly egotistic! That's the angle we're going to play on, but our minds will have to be in perfect accord. I want you all to be silent, but listen carefully to my every word, and concur with me *mentally* in everything I say!"

STRANGELY those mental fingers had withdrawn a little, and Jim wondered why. There was something almost cunning about it. They reached the plaza, and Spurlin with one man hurried to the surface car on the opposite side of the square. The others, more than a score in all, stopped before the building that housed the entity.

Jim knew that there could only be minutes now.

Even as he was formulating words in his mind, he felt the Dim-Ing's faculties expand again, surge out prodigiously to envelop them all. And with it came raucous mental laughter. The thing was laughing at them!

"Steady, you men," Jim said in a quick undertone. "Get ready now." And Jim laughed in return, laughed aloud and shortly. For beneath the Dim-Ing's laughter he thought he detected a false note! He felt that it was bluffing, stalling for time! But why?

"All right," he called aloud, "you have won! You have defeated us here, but in defeat we can laugh, for this will be your last victory! You will get to Earth but there you will meet your end!" Jim felt the power of the thing reaching out in a fierce resentment, but he continued tauntingly. "You will see that the Earthian mind does not fear you, they will seek you out. We have weapons to combat you that the

Martians know nothing of—you will not last long on Earth! If Bhruulo alone kept you here in thrall, Earthman can do that and much more—”

Jim had other words to say, mocking words, but he did not get a chance. The Dim-Ing lashed out with a terrible, unsuspected force. For a single second, all of M'Tonak was livid under a garish unbearable green, as the men were beaten down to their knees in a huddled miserable group. Buildings blurred and wavered and seemed to topple. The Earthmen's consciousness dangled by a thread.

“That is only a tiny sample of my power,” the thought came lashing at them. “That is to teach you not to drive me to anger again.”

The men rose painfully to their feet, clinging together. But Jim was exultant now. He could not have told why, but he felt that in that one supreme burst of anger the Dim-Ing had expended most of its power, and that is what he had been counting on!

“Your Earthian minds are stubborn, very stubborn. But I like that. I think I shall like Earth. Tell me more about the weapons you have there, the scientific devices you will use to combat me.”

What about Spurlin? Had he failed? That single, surface car was their only escape from here! It seemed hours since Spurlin had raced across the plaza toward it.

“We're lost, Jim,” Conley whispered wearily. “We're beaten. . . .”

“OH, no we're not!” For suddenly, strangely, the Dim-Ing did not grasp their minds any more! It was slipping away, and they felt strangely free and buoyant. But why? Why should it withdraw in its moment of triumph, just as it was learning what it wanted to know about Earth?

In an awful moment of panic Jim thought: “Did it read in my mind something about Kaarji—does it know what Kaarji is doing?”

Simultaneously, there came a shout from Spurlin across the way, and it was a triumphant cry. “Hurry up, you men! We've got these motors going, but Lord knows—”

Spurlin's welcome voice! Jim found

himself pounding across the plaza, behind the others. As in a dream he could hear the smooth threnody of the motors.

And for one last time he felt the mental power of the Dim-Ing reaching out, but it was half-hearted and uncertain, it wavered a little and seemed vaguely bewildered. Jim even paused in his stride and looked back defiantly. He felt it trying once more to grasp his mind, then it fell away disheartened. Not until then did the truth burst upon Jim, and he realized what was happening!

He reached the car last of all, and dropped exhausted across the threshold, as the re-action of all he had undergone suddenly hit him. He felt hands pulling him in and other hands sliding the door closed behind him. Even then the car was moving away, gathering speed toward the single obscure tunnel leading up and out of the vast cave of M'Tonak.

VIII

JIM knew nothing more until he struggled up again from the vast depths of darkness. This time, his mind felt blessedly alive and buoyant and free. He simply lay there against the soft cushion and let the strength flow back to him.

He sat suddenly erect. He was alone, and the car had stopped. He looked out into the white expanse of the Polar Cap once more.

He hurried to the door, and was relieved to see the rest of the men gathered outside, staring at something and talking excitedly. He joined them. Conley greeted him and pointed silently.

Barely a mile to the north, from whence they had come, a great greenish display suffused the lowering sky.

“That started a moment ago,” Conley said. “I think we got out of there just in time.”

Hardly had he spoken, when all of the ice-capped terrain beneath the light collapsed into a vast hollow, miles wide. It happened silently, abruptly; seconds later faint rumbling shook the ground. It was final. The greenish display had vanished and only the hollow remained, as if a giant had plunged his thumb into a rotten apple.

Conley sighed and turned away. “When

I think of poor Wessel and the others, buried a mile below there—"

"They got," Jim replied caustically, "just what they asked for. You'd better hope that entity is as dead as they are!"

"No doubt about that. But I can't understand it, Jim. I thought sure we were lost, when it was brow-beating us there in the plaza. What happened after that? All I remember is running for the car."

"What happened," Jim replied softly, "is that a wild hunch of mine worked. Did you ever indulge in Martian *tsith* stems, Conley? It's horrible, vile stuff; makes anyone, except an addict, violently ill. And it hits you suddenly, like a barrage of rocket-blasts. Well, I gave a whole pouch full—Kaarji's—to that Dim-Ing! D'you know, despite it being an other-dimensional entity, it had some very human qualities? Apparently it was curious, as well as egotistic; it must have investigated and then absorbed those *tsith* stems, and it became violently ill—at just the right time for us!"

Spurling had been trying desperately to get the motors started again, but to no avail. Now he approached the others with a worried frown.

"Those motors are so constructed that they can work in two ways. First, they can operate from a direct electronic beam—that's how Bhruulo controlled the car from a distance, and that's the way we've come as far as we have now. But with the destruction of M'Tonak, all the beams are gone!"

"Then you mean—we're stranded here?"

Conley pictured hundreds of miles of ice still lying before them. He remembered that the Cap had already started its break-up, and no man could ever get across it now. Not afoot!

"On the other hand," Spurlin was saying hopelessly, "the motors *should* work from the electronic emanations of that new metal we found. Even a tiny amount of it. But," he waved his hand to the north, "there it all lies buried and we'll never get to it in a million years!"

Defeat was in his voice.

For a moment the men milled about, looking at each other helplessly, before Jim remembered something.

"I've gone through too much," he grinned, "in the past few days to let a minor thing like this stymie me." With a feigned nonchalance, he reached into his pocket and drew forth a piece of metal. It was the rounded medallion which Kaarji had given him, and he'd forgotten until now.

Spurlin's eyes lighted, he seized it eagerly and went back to work.

Jim looked again toward the vast hollow to the north, and he spoke softly to Conley standing beside him:

"Spurlin's wrong, though. We'll get to that metal again, and Spurlin will see his super spaceship come true. It'll be a tremendous mining job, but—well, at least we know the metal's there, and it'll wait for us."

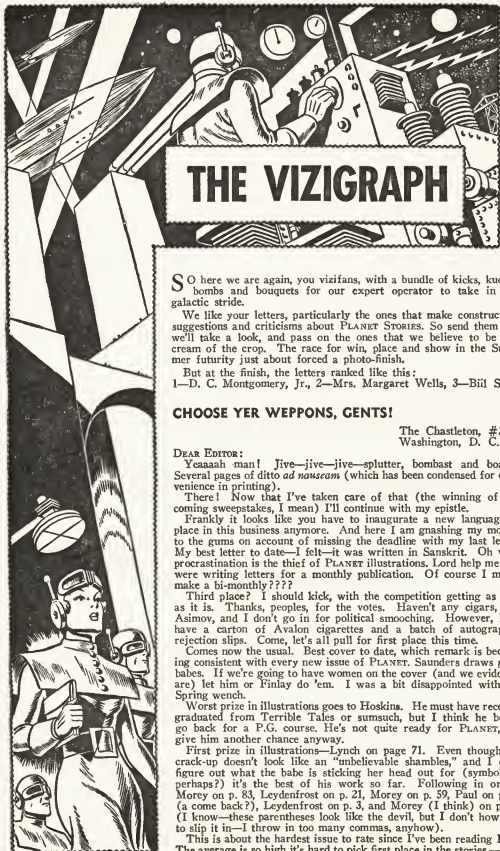
The sudden hum of the motors was a welcome sound in their ears, and minutes later they were speeding smoothly back to the south,

Fantastic • Adventure • Western • Mystery

No matter what your taste is, ACTION STORIES, is right. Every thrill-packed issue of this magazine contains not one, but *four* types of adventure-fiction.

ACTION STORIES

ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS



THE VIZIGRAPH

SO here we are again, you vizifans, with a bundle of kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets for our expert operator to take in his galactic stride.

We like your letters, particularly the ones that make constructive suggestions and criticisms about *PLANET STORIES*. So send them in; we'll take a look, and pass on the ones that we believe to be the cream of the crop. The race for win, place and show in the Summer futurity just about forced a photo-finish.

But at the finish, the letters ranked like this:

1—D. C. Montgomery, Jr., 2—Mrs. Margaret Wells, 3—Bill Stoy.

CHOOSE YER WEPPONS, GENTS!

The Chastleton, #222
Washington, D. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

Yecaaah man! Jive—jive—jive—splutter, bombast and boasts. Several pages of ditto *ad nauseam* (which has been condensed for convenience in printing).

There! Now that I've taken care of that (the winning of the coming sweepstakes, I mean) I'll continue with my epistle.

Frankly it looks like you have to inaugurate a new language to place in this business anymore. And here I am gnashing my molars to the gums on account of missing the deadline with my last letter. My best letter to date—I felt—it was written in Sanskrit. Oh well, procrastination is the thief of *PLANET* illustrations. Lord help me if I were writing letters for a monthly publication. Of course I might make a bi-monthly????

Third place? I should kick, with the competition getting as stiff as it is. Thanks, peoples, for the votes. Haven't any cigars, like Asimov, and I don't go in for political smooching. However, I do have a carton of Avalon cigarettes and a batch of autographed rejection slips. Come, let's all pull for first place this time.

Comes now the usual. Best cover to date, which remark is becoming consistent with every new issue of *PLANET*. Saunders draws good babes. If we're going to have women on the cover (and we evidently are) let him or Finlay do 'em. I was a bit disappointed with the Spring wench.

Worst prize in illustrations goes to Hoskins. He must have recently graduated from Terrible Tales or sunsums, but I think he better go back for a P.G. course. He's not quite ready for *PLANET*, but give him another chance anyway.

First prize in illustrations—Lynch on page 71. Even though the crack-up doesn't look like an "unbelievable shambles," and I can't figure out what the babe is sticking her head out for (symbolical, perhaps?) it's the best of his work so far. Following in order: Morey on p. 83, Leydenfrost on p. 21, Morey on p. 59, Paul on p. 43 (a come back?), Leydenfrost on p. 3, and Morey (I think) on p. 31. (I know—these parentheses look like the devil, but I don't how else to slip it in—I throw in too many commas, anyhow).

This is about the hardest issue to rate since I've been reading *P. S.* The average is so high it's hard to pick first place in the stories.——

The pause here is for three hours consumed in tearing at my tonsorial appendage and biting my nails off, up to the elbows, trying to figure out who rates first.

After weighty deliberation (and notice the improvement in my typing, since I've been using my elbows) I bestow the laurel wreath to Dirk Wylie for Asteroid of the Damned. The plot wasn't breath-taking, and I think it rates because of the characterization. My only complaint is on the Chinese money belt. I read the story over again, but couldn't find the trace of a plant for this denouement. Some more observant fan will probably pop up with it, but I couldn't find it.

Task to Lahri takes the strongest possible second place, in fact, I'm still wondering why not first. The look-over-your shoulder-and-under-the-bed complex engendered by the unwordly atmosphere was the best in a long time.

Although I think Mr. Hasse's letter is almost better than his story, Out of this World takes third place for the ability to create pictures or scenes in my mind as I read. (Which aforementioned fact is the test of fire, or sumpun? Lord help us if this starts another Asinine affair!)

Captain Chaos and Cosmic Derelict take fourth together. Broome seems to me a great deal like Bond, but this is not an accusation—just an opinion.

Fifth place to Smith for As it Was, although the "z" business almost wore me to a frazzle reading it. (Try reading it out loud, that's fun too!)

Mr. Wellman didn't quite click with me this time. I usually like his work, and I can't exactly put my finger on the reason I didn't like this one, yet . . . sixth.

If all the stories in the magazine were by Cummings, The Star Master would take first place, however, there was only one, so unfortunately he gets the back door again.

Grandiloquent Gifford's celestial cartoon series commences commendably, in fact, should be a smashing success. But don't tell me they're going to replace the Feature Flash.

Comes the sweepstakes and first place for Henry (that's to make up for the rating on the story, and—ha ha ha—remember?) Second to Stoy. His idea of an organization for Vizigraphers has been curdling in my cranium for some time. I almost broached the subject myself. Come on, fellas, how about it? Think we can do anything with it? I'll volunteer my services—for what they're worth—in any capacity. Third place to the Happy Genius, for his cunning conceit.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

This last chapter of my book is devoted to a re-hash of my missive that missed. It will probably be cut by Ye Editore, but I hated to see so much concentrated cogitation condemned to circumspection.

When I picked up my first copy of PLANET I hesitated some time before buying it. Then the reckless bucaneeering spirit that lurks within every reader of science-fiction said: "Go ahead! It's only twenty cents! Take a chance!" Reading merrily along, I finally passed the portals of the Vizigraph. Well! Well! And WELL! For my twenty cents I not only got an interesting magazine, but at the same time became eligible in this business of taking cracks at editors, authors, readers and illustrators. What more

could you ask for such a small investment? And so—I joined the army of Vizigraphers.

A short while back I remember one reader who would spend his last two dimes for our beloved alma maga, instead of stuffing himself with a double double chocolate soda. At the time I canted a quizzical eyebrow at the fellow—now, I agree with him heartily.

Part of the other letter was a protest about certain magazines, but realizing it might be libel, I'll censor part of it. No! This is getting too long already, I'll cut it out.

A brief essay on editors and then I'll shut up and crawl into a hole until the next issue. (Somebody will probably be glad to dig one for me.)

The editors of some of these magazines have tried to get the spirit of fellowship, camaraderie, hail-fellow-well-met, or what have you into their reader departments, etc., but I feel they tried too hard or something. At least they don't make it.

PLANET STORIES has an editor who has achieved perfection in this business of descending from Olympus to shake hands with mere mortals. The mixture of interest, cordiality and perhaps we can even say camaraderie, has made (and is making) PLANET the best magazine in the field. And if anybody wants to argue it out, the line forms on the left for bops on the beezers and on the right for nasty letters.

Hasta la vista, Amigos?

WILLIAM A. CONOVER.

VOKANTA KANADON!

Box 6475 Met. Sta.,
Los Angeles, Cal.

KARA REDAKTISTO:

Saluton! Kaj hola Sinjoro Goldsmith. This is the voice of MOROJO, calling Canada . . . in response to your paging me in the Vintra (Winter) edition of PS.

Few facts about myself? "Morojo" is derived from the initials of my maiden name, according to the Esperanto alfabeto, with a decisive "d" soffend to "j," which in the tung of tomorrow equals the English "y." Thus my adopted name is pronounced: Mo-ro'yo.

I am a "proto-J" of the famous 4sJ, World Stefan No. 1 and my mentor. He made me what I am today, I hope he's satisfied! I was familiar with science fiction before 4e was born, but I never paid attention to authors, readers' columns or clubs till Fojak (that's his Esperanto name) came along and turned me into a fan.

Now I have a collection of hundreds of professional magazines and hundreds more of the fan, co-edit Voice of the Imari-nation and Novacious, have attended over 150 meetings of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, am Librarian of the Shangri-LA group, been to both the Nycon and Chicon (New York and Chicago Science Fiction Conventions) and am member No. 2 of the organization sponsoring 1941's convention in Denver (the Denvention). I have seen such authors as Ray Cummings, Eando Binder, Ed Earl Repp, Nelson S. Bond, Ross Rocklynne, Henry Kuttner, Helen Weinbaum, Dr. Keller, Ray Palmer, Manly Wade Wellman, Edmond Hamilton, Ralph Milne Farley, Earl Vincent and Jno W. Campbell, Jr. I no longer believe personally, have danced with Jack Williamson at Earl Carroll's, tho I can scarcely believe it, have spoken with Paul "Skylark" Smith and H. G. Wells!

Thanx for the interest in me. Bon-sancon k sukceson al PLANED-FABELOJ!

MOROJO.

HI YO, MOSKOWITZ, AWAY!

603 So. 11th St.,
Newark, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

I am writing in reply to Damon Knight's letter on page 123 of the "Vizigraph" of the Spring, 1942 issue, which letter referred to the scientific accuracy of my story, "Man of the Stars," which appeared in the Winter, 1941 number of *PLANET STORIES*.

It seems strange to have to defend the scientific accuracy of a story which had some of its situations take place on the planet of mystery, Saturn. A world which, outside of its distance from the sun, the length of its year, and a few other elementary facts, we know virtually nothing. And the few generally accepted "facts" that text books give us are lamentably dependent upon the reputations of the various scientists who propounded them; for of proof, we have none.

First of all, Damon Knight wants to know: "Why, Lord, why? Space ships are supposed to be able to move in three dimensions; it shouldn't be much of a job to go AROUND the rings." No, it shouldn't be much of a job Damon, merely a practical impossibility! Quoting from John W. Campbell, Jr.'s article concerning Saturn, titled "Interplanetary Dividends" which appeared in the July, 1937 issue of "Astounding Stories":

"Saturn, further, has its rings, which simply do not stop at a predetermined level; they probably wander vaguely and treacherously another 100,000 miles or so into space."

Damon, reminds me of those carping critics, who, every time they read a story concerning a space ship's battle through the asteroid belt, naively and pugnaciously demand: "Why don't they go over or under it?" If they can show scientific, irrefutable proof of where "up" or "down" is in space, or where the asteroids abruptly cease and no longer constitute a danger, then, and only then, will science-fiction authors be able to oblige. Until that time, we shall have to follow the mathematically plausible deduction that a straight line is the shortest distance between any two given points.

Next, whether or not the surface of Saturn would be hot or cold. That's a very cute thing to mull over. Can you answer that question, Damon, with any degree of real scientific evidence. Your guess is as good as mine. Mine was that it would be hot, and I gave my points in the story to support that theory. I'm not alone in this conjuncture. John Hale in his article "Life on Saturn," in the November, 1939 issue of *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* also believes it would be hot. John W. Campbell, Jr., in his article "Beyond the Life Line" in the April, 1937 issue of *ASTOUNDING STORIES* in trying to lay a sensible pattern of what conditions on Saturn are like, first mentions that Saturn must have a tremendous gaseous atmosphere almost 20,000 miles in depth. But, the awful pressure per square inch, induced by the very weight of this atmosphere (which he states would be approximately one-fourth the density of water, if it did exist), would immediately contradict the gas theory, for gas simply couldn't exist as gas at that pressure. Then he goes on to say that it might then be a solid, a glacier of hydrogen and helium, and finally ends on this tone: "Is that guess the true explanation? Saturn—the

more we have learned, the less we have understood."

So what does it add up to? Simply three little words. *We don't know!* We suspect. We theorize. We utilize common-sense and logic, but they all add up to the disquieting but very simple fact that we don't know! You don't know, Mr. Knight. I don't know. Campbell doesn't know, no one knows, all we can do is guess. And until we actually visit the planet and get first hand information, my guess is as good as yours; heck! even as good as Einstein's.

Mr. Victor King, page 125 of "The Vizigraph" of the Summer, 1942 issue of *PLANET STORIES* ably explains the Methane and Ammonia in the atmosphere, for which, thank you Mr. King.

Mr. Damon Knight speaks of muscular cohesion, and other such trivia. In what I believe to be the most ridiculous criticism of all, he doubts the hero's ability to lift three or four hundred pounds under conditions of extreme emotionalism and terrific necessity. For the answer to that one I'll refer him to one of the world's foremost experts on unusual phenomenon, Ed Bodin, who wrote in a letter on page 5 of the January 1, 1941 issue of *FANTASY NEWS*:

"Thus began my investigations into so-called metaphysics in view to interpreting the strange phenomena I experienced with dying soldiers and the extraordinary powers I observed among men who were energized emotionally by the excitement of battle. I saw men so emotionalized that they were able to jump barbed wire fences higher than the world's record for the high jump. I saw a soldier lift a 200 pound enemy and toss him twenty feet as though he were a bag of flour. In such cases they had boosted the so-called mental voltage until they were supermen with super power. It proved to me that the human brain is a dynamo capable of energizing the body to perform action that electrical power can perform—such as knocking a man down by a mere touch, levitation ten times one's weight; light (which some sects call ghosts); radio pulsations which some call telepathy; heat, which accounts for natives in New Guinea and Tibet able to warm naked bodies in zero temperatures; decomposition which is utilized by the Kahunas of Hawaii in destroying an enemy by causing decay of his body through mental force of concentrating kahunas."

And finally we come to inertia. Have you ever been on a spaceship traveling many times faster than the speed of light, Mr. Knight? You haven't. Then what makes you so certain that the inertia under those conditions is unbearable—or that there is any inertia at all! Surely inertia at such cosmic speeds would no longer be inertia, but by its tremendous intensity have to become something else. Inertia and gravity have a similar ring. No one has ever been able to create a condition of inertia where there was no gravitational influence whatsoever, because it's impossible at the present day. But is the imagination of science-fiction fans so hide-bound, so limited, that they cannot conceive that conditions in outer space would be so different, so unusual, that all of our "natural" laws might have to be revamped. And the "laws" of inertia are no exception.

And finally, I might ask why Mr. Knight has seen fit to honor my story, of all stories, with the benefit of his scientific "wisdom." It seems that I've read dozens and dozens and dozens of

stories with the same "errors" he so painstakingly tries to point out in mine. S'funny, can't recollect ever having seen a letter of his refuting them. Maybe it's my story because of the little personal arguments we used to have back in fandom, huh, Damon, "dearly beloved."

Can I get back on my horse now, Mr. Reiss?

Sincerely yours,

SAM MOSCOWITZ.

YEAH!

136 East 28th Street,
New York City.

DEAR EDITOR:

Well! PLANET's readers incandescent! Plenty bright. Know merit when they see it. Voted Conway's letter in first place. Commendable. See great future for PLANET with such readers. Yeah.

And PLANET's editor also no slouch. On the contrary. Can learn from experience. Can take sound suggestions. Can deliver the goods. And then some.

Refer to "The Star Mouse." Funny. Wonderful. Real live humor. Refer to Leydenfrost. Sheer genius. Vivid. Individual. Refer to fanzines which say PLANET has stories coming up by Tucker. By Wilson. By Basil Wells. By Kubilius. Planetman not an old fuzzy. Not tied down by tradition. Not afraid to develop new writers. 'Ray!

Maybe can pass acid test. Difficult stuff. Maybe can get Cummings to write a new story. Good writer, Cummings, when has a story. Perhaps editor can introduce Cummings to a plot. Yeah.

Follows request. For original illustration due. Conway picks Leydenfrost spread. For the Brackett story. Yoicks!

Definitely yours,

W. KERMIT CONWAY III.

P.S. Mr. Michel also lives at above address. Can tote original home himself. Save PLANET postage. Conservation. Yeah.

CONWAY III.

'ERE'S H'ENGLAND H'AGAIN

82 Ramsgrave Drive,
Blackburn, Lancs.

DEAR EDITOR:

Last issue (Spring '42) of PLANET was purty good. Especially liked Leydenfrost's new drawings, but oh! a half nude woman on the cover again. His aliens are really something to admire tho'. Glad to see Asimov present, tho' his story wasn't so hot. For Gawd's sake, drop Cummings; drop him anywhere you damn well like, but get rid of him. He hasn't written a decent story for years now, and yet his name still appears. He's the hackiest hack in hackexistence. The name is J. E. Rennison and not G. E. Rennison. Thanks for printing the letter—got two replies to it so far—one from Winterbotham in person. Ray Houten's story was the best in the issue by far. More like this in a semi-fan style. Star-Mouse was punk as far as "humour" went. Otherwise it was passable, and a blind man could really have enjoyed reading it. No more for now, but keep up the good work. Britain's one and only pro sfm. mag. is no more. Alas, alack! Now I'll have to try and read at least one copy of PLANET thru.

Cheerio,

J. E. RENNISON.

ARE YOU SURE IT ISN'T
TOO MUCH, KING?

711 South Arch Street
Aberdeen, South Dakota

DEAR EDITOR:

I was really rather amazed that you deigned to print my little note, I had feared that it might be overly caustic, thus precluding any possibility of being printed. The rather strong references, particularly to Mr. Knight, were made in a moment of exasperation; I suppose I should apologize for their strength, but somehow, I don't feel a bit rueful.

This issue, let us dispense with puerile rating systems and those damned alphabetical societies. Let us merely make a few comments re stories, pix, and letters, and let it go at that.

Shall we tear into the artwork first this time? How come no credit lines for some of the pix? Leydenfrost is still going strong. His one weakness is an inability to portray faces. Watch this and keep him on futuristic panoramas or on semi-fantastic pix. Morey slipped back this issue. Paul didn't do so well, either. Lynch's gal is good, but he's back to his ringed and cratered planets. Nuts! I guess I wasn't wrong about Gifford. *Estabat bonissimum!* (My Latin's a little rusty but I guess that's right.) The massed asteroids are reminiscent of Lynch at his louisiest, but they're okeh in a cartoon. The cover: Well, at least the M isn't BE, and the gals do have shape. Too similar to your first cover, tho, considering the phalanxed gals—they look like a chorus line—and Egbert, the Enterprising Earthman. The moving finger picks Leydenfrost once and twice and Gifford, or Paul if Guy isn't available. So on to the stories. . . .

This issue happens to be one of Stoy's "slumps." First spot is hauled down by "Task to Lahri." The story didn't go up to first. I don't like Characters. At first this series was a relief from the "Super-Earthman Foils Plots of Unbelievably Nasty Aliens" type of yarn, but now it's a little too, too formula: Ego transference; Alien mind gains control over Terrestrial; Terrestrial learns Alien viewpoint; and achieved; Terrestrial feels like a heel.

"Out of This World" was good, but hardly science-fiction. It could have had a good ironical ending had the escape failed after everything had gone thru on schedule as narrated.

"Captain Chaos" took third. Obviously an allegory on the swine. But good! Without Bond's faculty for humor, it would have been just another story with an obvious ending.

"Venus Enslaved": Why must Venusians always be unbelievably beautiful amazons? I never did like Wellman to excess, and his corny Elizabethan dialect strengthens the aversion.

"As It Was": Well! Talk about irony! I should like it, but somehow—I can't put my finger on a reason—it has to come this far down on the line.

"The Cosmic Derelict": As bad as the title.

"Asteroid of the Damned": Obvious plot. One of these days an author is going to write an sf story in which the science does not appear to be an afterthought. Just another futuristic detective tale.

"The Star Master": It's a carbon copy of "War Nymphs of Venus" of a few issues back.

Betcha he has his story mimeographed, leaving blanks for the names; must be quite a tax on his ingenuity thinking up new ones.

Now for the Vizigraph: Why cut the letters? We'd rather have you cut the Cummings story. Can do?

Fandanten! Now the pros are ganging up on us? Hasse, Bond, Wellman—how can this keep up? Asimov started it, and he seems to have set a vogue. We poor amateurs haven't a chance against this new competition. I'll have to excuse Mr. Hasse's rugged punnery, after all, I debased myself to some extent, too. I think I'll give him first place. He tried so-o hard. Ask him to send my type-script by registered mail, I wouldn't want to have it lost in transit.

Brackett extols the virtues of Binder. I disagree. True, Otto can turn out some very creditable yarns, but lately, he's gone into mass-production of pot-boilers. If he submits good stuff, take it, but don't buy his yarns merely because he has a name.

Heiner: The best three mags in this field are quarterlies—figure it out for yourself. No magazine can keep draining the authors eternally without lowering the quality of the fiction produced. Even *PLANET* has to take some pretty, er, bad ones. Lay off Bok's stories! They're neither stf nor good.

"Perfectly normal morons," says Mrs. Wells. Well, despite the incongruity of the adjective and noun, maybe she's right. It seems only the intelligentsia can enjoy the true stf.

Second place to Mr. Gray. His letter is at least well thought out, despite the fact that I disagree on minor points. More about Cummings: "She was younger than I thought—perhaps sixteen. Poor blind little Alyce. Pitiful creature!"

Pitiful creature, indeed! Ghaaaaa-a-a-a. . .

The way Lesser writes, I would suspect that he is still trying to sell his stories. Why a novel in each issue? Authors grind out novels for one of two reasons: A—They know they can sell 'em, whether they're good or not; B—They know they'll be good enough to sell themselves. We'd rather have good shorts than hack novels any day. I like the way *PLANET* ignores the little green idol, Policy. Give Lesser third spot, probably because no one else merits it.

Well, I guess that's all. That's enough!

Au'voir,

VICTOR KING,
King, of the Poison Pen.

YAH, SISSY, SCARED TO FIGHT?

McAlester, Oklahoma.
600 West Grand

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm giving the mags at the local newsstand the usual hopeful uncover, for something in the science fiction line, when I see a copy of *PLANET STORIES*, Summer Issue. Aha! I grab it and turn to the Vizigraph. Hmmm. A letter from Larry Shaw—Bill Stoy—Guy Gifford. Oh well. I didn't really expect. . . Whoopee! There it is, there's my letter! Look, Mr. Newsdealer, isn't it beautiful? I wrote that letter. Oh, you've read it? What do you mean, dull and opinionated? A fine thing. You don't appreciate good literature, that's what.

Well, I took the magazine home. I read all the letters first. They were worth the price of

admission. I agree with Montgomery about the factors that make a good SF story. But I can forgive anything if a story is enjoyable. I love this guy Lesser; he's so modest. Miss Goempel, please say you were just kidding when you said you missed the planets on the cover. And, Miss Brackett, I think you ought to read the Grey Lensman series. You will learn what a zwilnik is, and you might not be so sure that Binder is better than Smith. At least you'll know what you are talking about.

Give letter ratings as follows—Heiner, Stoy, Shaw. That Heiner is a man after my own heart. "Phooey," he says, "I don't like funny stories. . . I'm a pessimist."

Good cover this time. You've got the right combination now. Distinctive, colorful, eye-pleasing. The inside stuff was all good, though I think I liked Lynch's best.

Now the stories. No. 1—"Venus Enslaved." That's for me. That's the kind of story I like. No. 2—"The Star-Master." Much better, Mr. Cummings. Though that aerial battle did sound a bit familiar. No. 3—"The Cosmic Derelict." Nice going! Mr. Broome swept me off my feet. No. 4—"Asteroid of The Damned." The kiddies caught my fancy. No. 5—"Out of This World." Mr. Hasse's story and letter both good. Would have voted his letter first place but he's a professional. For that matter, so am I. I once got fifty cents for something I wrote. By the way, I met those ghosts later and they said the Pico "Boo" got that way from booing Hasse's humor. No. 6—"Captain Chaos." This one would rate higher, but it's in fast company. No. 7—"Tasks to Lahri." Swell writing. But I just couldn't like it. Too unpleasant. No. 8—"As It Was." Good enough story. What's that, Junior? You say you once read an entirely different version of Creation?

Right about here I ought to insult the editor. I ought to say something bad about the mag; then remark flatly that my letter is sure to be thrown into the wastepaper basket. Why do all this? That's almost a sure-fire trick to get your letter published.

Now to close. If I have offended anyone I just want to say that I'm not six feet tall, but I am very hard to locate having had valuable experience with creditors.

Sincerely,

JAMES RUSSELL GRAY.

WE'RE DOING OUR PART

1301 State Street,
Schenectady, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

I hopped off my bike and slammed it carelessly into the racks. Then, as I turned to the school building, I was knocked violently down from behind. I felt a pair of heavy wheels pass over my prone, shuddering body. When I had finally recovered my breath, I looked up—into the stupidly grinning face of none other than Harvey Gunn Marcy. As soon as he saw that I was conscious, he started to scream loudly in my ear. I managed to make out something about "*PLANET STORIES* is out today!"

"Oh yes, today is the first, isn't it?" I muttered, giving him a dirty look. He was too exuberant to notice it, though. In the locker annex, the halls, and finally the home room, all he could talk about was "*PLANET STORIES*. *PLANET STORIES*! Do you think they printed

my letter?" Finally, I suggested that we had time before classes to find a store selling it. We scrambled out, and at last located one. But the magazines weren't in yet. About nine o'clock. "Hmmm. What have you got second period?" "Physics. I'd better be there." So we finally decided not to skip, but to come back at noon hour.

At noon it was raining, but we couldn't let a little thing like that stop us. We made a dash for the store. On the way, I depleted Harvey's peanuts, promising to treat him to something when we reached the place. A rapid search of the magazines, and Harv pulled out THE mag. The Vizigraph was quickly searched, and Harvey exploded as he found his letter. He shelled out his quarter, almost forgetting his change. He also forgot that I had promised to treat. We headed back for school, looking at the rest of the mag on the way. But after I had made some crack about Shaw, Harv stuck it under his sweater "so it wouldn't get wet."

Well, after school we pedaled up to my house and I picked up my copy at the newsroom downstairs, then up to Marcy's where we digested the pictures and the Vizi. I got home late for supper.

I did the stories yesterday, so here's the dope. I didn't care much for the cover. The monster took up too much room, giving the thing a careless appearance. And was Saunders afraid to put a face on one of them? He may have possibilities, though; the background wasn't bad.

Best of the stories was "Venus Enslaved." Mr. Wellman can always be counted on to turn out a good, solid story. This one moved right along logically and clearly. Plenty good.

"Task to Lahri" wasn't far behind. The stories in this series have all been swell, and really different. This was, I think, the best one yet.

And the entertaining "Captain Chaos" captured a third. Bond usually has a ringer when he does this type of story. Of course, it was obvious that "Andy" was a girl, but that didn't spoil it. Very nice.

"Cosmic Derelict," reading a great deal like a Bond story, came right behind Bond. The plot, the style, the things like "bulgers" were all in the Bond tradition, which is all right with me. I didn't think Broome had it in him.

"Asteroid of the Damned" was also swell. A nicely turned, readable little yarn that held my interest right along. Close behind it was 'Out of This World.' This was all O. K., too, but I still wish Hasse could keep away from this horrible torture stuff. Phooey on it, sez I; it certainly never seems to give the effect he must be trying for.

Then came the Smith thing. It wasn't at all bad, quite entertaining, but there seemed to be one flaw. When Baird destroyed the primordial puddle, thus destroying all life in the future, wouldn't he and Di-Pisk have been destroyed, too? And if not, why not?

Last, of course, was "The Star-Master" by the hack-master. Ray does seem to be improving some; at least, I finished this one, but I still don't like his type of story or his style.

All in all, a very nice choice of stories, Mr. Reiss. Nice work.

The art struck a good average, with Leydenfrost for "Derelict" best, Paul a close second, and Leydenfrost's other pic still in the excellent class. Morey is still sloppy, though the one on page 83 showed traces of his old, and good, style.

Hoskins didn't have much to show, but he may have possibilities, too. Frankly, I was quite disappointed in The Ringers. The picture was too confusing to pack any kind of a punch, and the gag certainly was nothing to brag about.

Now to the Vizi, and I'm definitely not in favor of the cutting. Present fewer letters if you have to, but don't cut unless absolutely necessary. It really doesn't seem fair to the contestants. But if you must cut, be careful! In my letter, you cut out what I thought was one of the best parts, then put on a heading referring to that part. There was also a remark later on in the letter referring back to it, rather cryptic as it now stands. Oh, well. . .

Perhaps you've noticed that I don't vote for the same letters all the time that the others do. That is, the trick letters, the cute ones. I didn't vote for Finn, I didn't vote for Conway's yeah-stuff, and I am not going to vote for Mister Bob "Flocko Batidior" Roberts. Instead, I pass the first to a letter that I think really deserves it, Bertha R. Goempel's. Nice going, Bertha, and welcome to the Vizigang. This will also prove that I don't vote for people just because they agree with me. Second place goes to little old Harvey Marcy. He is so innocent; he said to me, "Won't they be suspicious if we vote for each other?" You see, he doesn't know the facts of life yet. But his letter stuck to the point, at least. And as for my part in his conversion, it really wasn't very hard. For some strange reason, the dope seems to like PLANET. By the way, this copy is the first one he's bought himself; before this he borrowed 'em all from me. There, Harvey, I said it! And before I forget, give third to Bill Stoy. A nice letter, and a swell idea at the end. I can't think of anything along those lines right now, but if someone else gets a bright idea, I'll be glad to string along.

Henry Hasse should know better. A pun's the lowest form of wit, though his, I spectre as good as any. Haunt we got fun, though?

Roy Patzke should know better, too, than to start another of those societies. If I dared to start one, I think one to end all such societies forever might not be a bad idea.

John L. Gergen, my latest correspondent, will be glad to know that I have saved the world from ending by taking back my title. I just didn't feel to home without it, anyhow.

Heiner almost won this time, that is in my opinion anyway, if that's any comfort to him. How could he be dumb enough to vote for me, tohugh? Boy, do I overwork that word "though," though! And Gifford deserves congratulations for becoming the father of little Guy.

Victor King knocked me right out of my seat by calling me a professional perennial. No foolin', I was amazed. But Victor, new rating systems are another thing that are bound to get you shot at.

Hey, everybody, let's get a lot more readers for PLANET so it will go monthly! *I do my part; do you?*

I know that this is slightly monstrous in length, Mr. Reiss, but I hope you don't cut it. And if you must cut, remember: I, for one, am more interested in Roy Patzke's little brother's nosebleed than I am in what Roy thinks of the stories.

Yours,

LARRY SHAW.

(The one and only original Hermit. Look for the big red letters on the cave.)

AT LEAST NOT LESS LESSER! YEAH?

2302 Avenue O
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

The unsuspecting man sat comfortably in his overstuffed chair. He was finished with a day of hard work, and was glad. Yet, that night, doom, dark, grim, utter tragedy was to strike at his quiet home. But for the one light near the man's chair, the house and surroundings were in darkness. Then, out of the strangely chilled air of the night, slithered sixteen varieties of XQWZ serpents from the hot marshlands of Venus. They approached the unsuspecting victim. One poked its slimy, repulsive head up toward the chair. It leaped. The other fifteen followed.

The body was identified next morning.

That above melodrama, Editor, is true. It happened on Venus. You see, there was an editor of a mag, Planetorial Adventure Stuff, I think it was called. He ran the best letter department in the business. And then something, something very strange made him cut some of the formerly unabridged letters. It ruined the department. So the fans got together: result . . . the horrible XQWZ death!

In other words, don't cut any more letters. Print less, but no cut. Thanks.

So that's off my chest. So what. Yeah. Maybe. Could be. Am glad. There, isn't that a sure way to cop first. The unmistakable Conway style. He did it, so can I. Yeah. Maybe. Could be. Am glad. Is possible.

This letter, besides being filled with crazy humor of the distinctly gestanko style only this genius could create, will also contain some suggestions, which I think would help. Happy Genius always right. Forget the "Yeah." This way it will save space. Or will it?

If you could see me now, I am drooling monotonously over the typewriter. I can't think of a thing to say.

Here is a note of advice to the young women with babies. Don't let Asimov kiss them, that's a friendly warning. I hear he swallows them whole. I said babies—not babes!

Also to the young men, about those cigars. I understand that they blow up in your face. As soon as a guy I know comes back from the hospital, he can verify that. No face!

OK, now some suggestions. At least if you can't have a novel, tell us why? They improve an issue a great deal. I'm sure you could have one each time. I hope. Could be. And Yeah. Plus, perhaps. Ditto.

Now it comes again. As everyone says, from the happiest happy genius, to the saddest sad sap, let's have Binder, and in the leading role.

Say, I'm supposed to be talking about the latest PLANET, so I might as well start here.

"Hey, you, Louie, fourth vice president (note the noun in apposition), wind me up, will ya. And thanks! Etc."

Aiuueeeeeeeeeee! The cover! Hiccupping horrors of Hermes! What is it? Wait a minute while I spit savagely in the mouth of my waiting goldfish. Wait another minute, the goldfish spat back.

Wait another minute, please. I'm going to swallow this fish and use ink as a chaser. I'll be right with you!

Gurgle! Splutter! Choke! Zoom and nosh! There, that does it. But I still think I wasn't supposed to swallow the bowl, too.

Anyway, don't wait any longer. 'Cause I'm ready. This Saunders can't draw science-fiction. At least not this time he didn't.

Aha! Now for the stories. And since I feel like clowning so much, I'll spend less time on them than usual.

Hasse hasn't done so well as "Out of This World" since the great "Proktoles of Neptune," a year ago. This is first. And almost as good as Hank's letter.

So Rocklyne's back. And with the third of the Halmyer series. Good. He and the series are swell. This story is a close number two.

Who is Carlton Smith? That was a nice short (no undies again) he wrote. "As It Was" is easy for third place.

So you finally got a hold on M. W. Wellman. There, wasn't it worth it? His fourth place yarn, "Venus Enslaved," though with no plot, is good because of the remarkable handling.

OK, "Captain Chaos" is fifth. Good. But not up to Bond par.

Then, of course, there were three more stories. Cummings did one, Wylie and Broome did the other two. They were alright. That's all. Just alright.

Ah, to kid around, some more!

Do you want to hear something really funny? Yes? Well, I'm going to win first prize. And the editor, like a good pal, is going to send me either the first Leydenfrost, the Morey for "As It Was" or the other Leydenfrost.

Now for the letters. I won't even rate mine. It stands out by itself in the immortal class. (But sadly, only I think so.)

First, of course is the amusing Henry Hasse, with your best letter ever. And I will personally declare war on anyone who tries to disqualify him on the grounds of him being professional. So what! Then Gergen. No comment. A good letter, but he bores me. (Because we don't have the same opinions). Third is Heiner, and I see it's no more four apples, two pears and one peach equals seven bananas.

Get Bok back. You CAN'T afford to loose a man like him. BOK. BOK. BOK. (that's just to remind you).

So the Ringers are here. Well, fine, welcome Gifford, and stuff. Very clever drawing, too. Incidentally, do you see the fifth rocket behind the eighteenth asteroid. You don't? Well, I'm the pilot.

Here's one of my poems.

Up to the door I tare

To woo my lady fair.

Then she kicks me out. Yeah.

Oh, you don't like my poems. And at this point you're getting bored with the whole letter. I should hang up, eh! I should stop annoying you. I should never darken your mailbox with my waning typing ink. Alright, if that's the way you want it. I'll write you every three months, and no more. Say, thinking of it, that's all I ever did write you, and then, oh, what's the use, forget it.

Sure I'll keep plaguing you. It's in the blood. Yeah.

Now about Conway, and his style. Why, why under the galaxies' billion stars should that crackpot way of writing win every one over enough to vote for his letter? It didn't move me to such great lengths. I wasn't enthralled, or in a trance after reading it. In fact, it was boring. Probably Conway can't write any other way. Yeah.

OK, this letter is long enough, so I will hang up.

Until next time, this is that marvelously monotonous, momentous moron signing off. Lesser for President!

MILT LESSER.
The Happy Genius.

A NEW GOVERNMENT PROJECT

Ringgold, Texas

Dear Editor:

This letter and copies go to the leading S. F. mags. I have been reading S. F. since sometime in the middle twenties when "Science and Invention" carried "Dr. Hackensaw's Secrets" and "The Man on the Meteor." I, for one, have seen lots of S. F. become fact.

But so much for that. I have a cause to put before the brotherhood and sisterhood, if I ever conquer this typewriter. I hope the learned Editors can unscramble this before, and if, they see fit to print it. I believe that there are those among us who are not content with day dreaming of the Utopia to come. We want to help bring it about. It is to those readers that the rest of this letter is written. I know you have enough imagination to see the need of my plan and the initiative to help put it into operation.

Now, the men who invent the really revolutionary inventions never have the money to prove them to the ever skeptical public. Who knows how fast our science would advance once this hindrance were overcome. Fulton worked and schemed for years trying to present the steamboat to a public for whom his invention should have been working all of the time. The same was true of all of the inventors of the past and will be true of those of the future unless WE DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!

We, our government, are spending billions at present for defense. Now if we could interest our senators, representatives, and our president and get them to set aside a few million for the defense and future security of our nation we would at long last be taking a real step in the right direction. A board would be selected to take care of this fund, in the interest of the inventors of our country who couldn't otherwise give their priceless talent. Some of this money would be spent for combined laboratories, machine shops, and foundries to be located so that they would be reasonably accessible to all parts of our country. Each one need not cost more than twenty thousand dollars. Men of this caliber do not need elaborate equipment, in fact they are willing and mentally able to adapt machinery to their needs. Each applicant for time in the shops would be given a test, probably in the form of an I.Q., to ascertain their ability to guide their thoughts capably down an unbeaten path. Incidentally, the board might well take this same exam. He would then be assigned a certain period in the shops, reporting his progress periodically. If he hits a slump he is to give up his time until he can again show progress. When his invention is finished he is to explain it fully and submit it to a government supervised test side by side with the article or articles that it is to replace. The invention is then judged by these results and bought or placed on the market on the same basis. The inventor is to pay out of the proceeds back into the fund a given percentage to perpetuate the organization. In simple words, a man upon passing his test is given time in the shops regardless of the fact that his proposed invention will probably seem radical and impossible. If it is any good at all, IT WILL BE RADICAL!

Remember that there have always been obstructions in the way of great inventions because the general public cannot cope with a NEW idea. If everyone could see the possibilities of proposed inventions, everyone would have already invented them. The inventor makes our tasks easier, our pleasures more complete, makes our country what it is in health, wealth and happiness, yet every man is helped on his way except the inventor. He is America's forgotten man. Help this man and you will live to see the wonders of which we now read in our favorite fiction mags. Help him to help you quicker.

Write or wire to your senators, your representative, and your president today and tell them that you think that the time is here to help the American inventor. Any of you that can think of a better plan, don't keep it under your bonnet, start it moving and do your best to keep it moving. You fellows that can appreciate good science fiction can also do this.

In all sincerity,
J. C. RAY.

FANTASY READERS UNBALANCED?

Pardecville, Wis.

DEAR MR. EDITOR:

I have always professed that all Fantasy readers are more or less mentally unbalanced. The letter of a certain Mr. Wiggins in Vizigraph not only bears me out but places him near the top of the whole insane lot of addicts. He writes two letters of a thousand words or more, all in derogatory and insulting vein, nothing constructive or informative, which sum up to: "I don't like anything about your magazine", which he immediately contradicts with, "I remain a reader and a booster". Oh, Lord! What fools some mortals be!

Personally I think the WINTER edition a fair accomplishment. The SPRING issue is decidedly better, excellent even. You have nothing to be ashamed of and a lot to boast about, so don't take anything from know-nothing windbags like a certain Mr.

Pretending, as most of us do, that PLANET STORIES is published for me alone, here are my editorial requirements for the Fall number:

1. A complete short novel of from 20,000 to 30,000 words, two novelettes, and the remainder short stories.

2. No more than two departments, the present ones, author biographies and "Vox Pop". No horoscopes, crossword puzzles, and the like.

3. A forecast of some of the coming stories and when it will appear on the newsstands.

4. More of Ray Cummings and a continuation of the adventures of his George Carter and Princess Lea in the World within the Atom. Also further developments with Nelson Bond's Time Machine and the characters in "Dictator of Time".

5. A continuation of the pleasant mingling of femininity in the stories with even an occasional bit of sex-appeal.

In conclusion I am listing what I consider to be the five best stories in the first two issues.

1. Dictator of Time—Bond
2. The Golden Amazons of Venus—Reynolds
3. The Girl from Infinite Smallness—Cummings.
4. Goddess of the Moon—Reynolds
5. Martian Terror—Repp

Sincerely yours,
STANLEY HAYNES.

LOOK! IT'S ALL HERE!

700 East North Street
Opelousas, Louisiana

DEAR EDITOR:

At the sound of the gong, Malcolm Reiss shall be permitted to drag so-called cover artist Saunders out into the street by the feet and behold him.

(Ca-long!)

Now run upstairs quickly, wipe off your hands on the latest Cummings manuscript and commence to read, before the boys in white come to measure you for a new straight jacket—with-out cuffs.

The old refrain rings out again: 'Twas the hardest task yet to decide just what was what about the old VIZ. After a complicated process all have been eliminated except six, two tying for each of the three spots. I know that it will make it all the more tiresome for you, but since when is a sfan supposed to show mercy?

1st: Mrs. Margaret Wells who convinces me, with a fine letter, that I am no moron, while Victor King did something I wanted very much to do, but could not; i.e., take "Nightie" Knight down a teg or poo. The King downs the Knight—and rather forcefully, too.

2nd: Larry Shaw and Milton Lesser, the PLANET TWINS. What would the VIZ and PS be without these two loyal souls?

3rd: John L. Gergen and D. C. Montgomery.
87th: Hasse.

The most fiendish thought of the century: If Gifford wins, give him the original for the Ringer Family cartoon!

Messages: To the "Gentle Crusader," Stoy: I am not an enthusiast of Cummings. His early works are still recalled fondly and I have set out upon a feeble and thus far futile campaign to turn Ray from the banalities he shells out to-day back to the solid stuff of yesteryear. . . . Gergen: What's wrong with me following the fad and using a nickname, as you put it? Why don't you? "The Irritated Intellect" oughta suit you, huhn? . . . Shaw: You've got the idea I don't like Mad Man Marlow. I do. He's a good guy—a swell fellow—as fine and upstanding a young man as there ever was. Only he's nuts.

YARNS: 1st, TASK TO LAHRI—Terribly, too terribly similar to Rocklynn's EXILES OF THE DESERT STAR in both the characters and the ego transmitting machine, as well as the general atmosphere. Nevertheless, one I shall remember.

2nd: VENUS ENSLAVED and they won't like this one, although I did. You've gotten Wellman at last. Thanx, plenty. The story started off swell (that's where Wellman gets in the punch that spellbinds you—at least, me), but as the story progressed, more and more action filled the pages until it was one mad scramble of flying fists, blasting hand grenades, screams of the dying, thuds of the dead, and the revolting gurgling of any one of twelve or thirteen vile monsters. As far back as I can remember, Wellman has never used action of any form unless it was vitally essential to the progress of the plot. Here, he used it so freely as to give the impression that he was trying to stretch it to a certain length and no less, regardless.

My final decision is that I liked the yarn because it was refreshing, if not classical. Wellman is my favorite author and he well merits such a position. Give him another chance and

some elbow room. He'll turn out another "TWICE IN TIME" or "MEN AGAINST THE STARS."

4th: CAPTAIN CHAOS—which leaves you with a very, very good taste in your mouth. 5th: AS IT WAS—I will be the only one ranking it this high. 6th: THE COSMIC DERELICT—another interplanetary, and the third COSMIC DERELICT I have read. Couldn't you have called it DERELICT OF THE COSMOS? 7th: ASTEROID OF THE DAMNED—More of wiley Wylie and his Kiddies; I liked 'em. 8th: OUT OF THIS WORLD—and Hasse hates me. Whisper to the guy that his tale was alright, only the others were better—which in itself isn't very comforting.

I am happy to see the smash hit Leydenfrost made. Probably the biggest I have ever heard of. I am sorry to see that CHILD OF THE SUN did not roll smooth with the others. It was a classic, regardless.

And . . . oh, yes! I almost forgot! (subtle me) I won a place in the last ish, so I am entitled to an original. I won't thank the fans for their votes, for if they could see the way I'm kicking holes in the ceiling they'd know how I appreciate them. If it means I must choose a pic out of the ish in which my name was listed, give me, first, the PAUL spread for THE STAR MASTER. Naturally, Conway will want that one, cuss him! Second choice, Leydenfrost for Rocklynn. And ship it quick, will ya, huh?

Incidentally, the STAR MASTER is in a class that should hang around up there between Bond and Wellman, which is a somewhat honored spot. Kernel Cummings was heads above the muck in this last and he had my attention throughout. Still there was the alien glamor gal as well as a few wooden characters, and of necessity, the inevitable successful revolt against some vile, oppressing something. Take good care of Ray, Mr. Reiss. He shows definite signs of blossoming again.

Your threat of freezing the VIZ hangs over me like a dark cloud. I am frantically trying to cut down this letter and telling you about it merely makes it longer. Short letters are lousier. This one is lousier whether it turns out short or long. In fact, the shorter the better, but we are away from the point again.

I'd like to say that fewer letters—a few, long, lengthy ones—would be considerably better than a lot of short, stilted, cut-down ones. If one, lone, solitary word is deleted from the text of this missive, Rajah Reiss will be suddenly and mysteriously plagued by merrily sputtering time bombs under his pillows, inch-long Louisiana ants in his flannels—why his sugar bowl might even be found dumped over!

In conclusion, let's have:

A LOT OF: Wellman, Lesser and Shaw, Bracketales, Leydenfrost's true art, purple Zwiiniks and Reiss in the Viz.

MORE: ishs of PS per year, tales with a vaster scope, Asimovonom and the Giffordrool, and more off-trail yarns, like AS IT WAS.

Less: Lynch (still less!), Cummings, down to earth yarns and gallant heroes.

No more: people who say PS is no good (were there any?), Mussachia, talk of shortening the VIZ and Saunders.

I might close with a statement that will immediately attract the annoying attention of a certain editor: "PLANET IS DEFINITELY THE ACME OF EVERYTHING IN THE STF LINE THAT EXISTS TODAY!"

Unquote.

ALFRED E. MAXWELL.

WELL, WHY DIDN'T YOU?

Lidgerwood, N. D.

DEAR EDITOR:

By this time you are doubtless the recipient of several score letters expressing their annoyance at me for introducing a Society to a hitherto excellent VIZIGRAPH.

To forestall those who will insist that the STGAPPITVET is merely an empty name, and to answer ye Ed's question about membership requirements, I submit the following information, as given to me by the secretary:

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

His Supreme Insolence, the President: Roy Paetzke.

Their Extreme Hopefulness, the Vice-Presidents, 1 to 39: Roy Paetzke, Roy Paetzke, etc.

His Most High Illiteracy, the Secretary: Roy Paetzke.

His Utmost Sagacity, the Treasurer: Roy Paetzke.

All officers are elected for a period of sixty-five years, and are pensioned upon retirement.

All you have to do to join is pay the dues. These come to ten cents per month or a 3-cent stamp a week under the easy-payment plan. If you're too busy, you don't even have to include your name with the remittance; your money will receive consideration. Come on, Asimofans!

Stories rate as follows:

1. "As It Was"—I'll be the only one to rate this first, but it was different.

2. "Asteroid of the Damned."

3. "Captain Chaos." That Hero-Turns-Out-to-Be-A-Girl-Ending is corny, though.

4. "Task to Lahri"—how about a little variation in the plots of the series?

5. "Venus Enslaved."

6. "Out of This World." Good characterization.

7. "The Cosmic Derelict."

8. (And if you printed 20 stories an issue it would be 20.) "The Star-Master." Read MWW's story, Ray, with almost the same plot, and try to do the same next time.

Best pix were Lynch for "Captain Chaos." Hoskins for "Venus Enslaved," and, of course, that swell Gifford cartoon. There is more art in that cartoon than in any other I've seen.

Give Gifford first place in the letter section too. (Alas, Isaac isn't with us today.) Any letter to the VIZIGRAPH should analyze the pix and the stories. Gifford's was good enough to get by, but should we make it a more or less general rule? How about it, readers?

Assign second place to Hasse and third to Paetzke.

Come, come, Ed. If I were giving Paetzke third just because he's a relative, I would have voted him first, wouldn't I?

ROY PAETZKE.
The Mastermind.

BUT DUNT EET REED NIZELY!

DEAR EDITOR:

It has been many a moon since our pages have been graced with a missive from Raym Washington, Jr., a Master of Fiction, a Sultan of Satire, a Sinner of Syntax. Prepare yourselves, humble slaves, but do not try to touch the hem of my robe, lest the fearful lightnings from the realm of the Russian Front strike you sprawling on the greensward.

Needless to say, I read the Summer issue of PLANET, and now I'm worrying myself sick, fear-

ing that I've waited too long to get this printed. You will stop the presses, won't you, Mister?

I was down on "K" Level, supervising a construction job, when the big speaker horns belled forth:

"Send Raym to the Hangar Level at once!"

Leaving the robots plodding dully at their task, I went clicking down the shining corridor to the elevator, wondering what new hellish schemes the mad geni on "A" Level had cooked up.

The elevator shot upward. I alighted at the Hangar Level. The awful heat smote me in waves, but, with a sly slug of Xeno, I stalked over to the sweating flight commander.

The scene was a blaze of color and motion. White-jumped mechanics swarmed over the blood-red bombers out on the line, and tall rangy fliers sprinted purposefully toward the bar.

"The Summer ish of PLANET is out," said the Flight Commander.

I needed no second urging. I leaped to a waiting plane, and a mechanic kicked the blocks away from the wheels. I revved up the engine, and then the smoky tarmac stretched endlessly before me.

I taxied her down the fan-shaped runway, and into the sweltering blue sky. I was glad for the automatic temperature-compensating air-cooling system, for outside the heat was 130°.

On, on, across a heat-blasted landscape, over battered coastal cities and fire-blackened inland towns; on, on, across a dying land, while the mighty engine sang her throaty song of power.

The St. Helena airdrome was packed. Ignoring the frantically-signaling dispatcher, I dropped her down and taxied up to the newsstand.

"Gimme a batch of PLANET STORIES," I blurted, hurling wave after wave of spinning silver coins at the proprietor. He nodded wearily.

With the mags stowed in the rear compartment, I swung back down the runway and hauled back the stick. When dizzy nausea had passed, I ventured to look back, but the St. Helena airdrome was a tiny white patchwork of color four miles below.

I took her in low, plunked down on the hot grills of the home runway. Somehow, I was glad to taxi into the warm gloom of the Hangar, to wait until a sweating mechanic said loudly:

"Raym, return to your quarters at once!"

Sneaking a copy of PLANET under my jacket, I dropped with bullet-like speed in the elevator to my quarters.

Geel! All this foreword stuff has taken up a lot of space, no?

Three Best Stories: AS IT WAS, COSMIC DERELICT and OUT OF THIS WORLD, in that order. Illustrations could be improved, what?

Oh, goody, the Vizigraph. Very good, this time, very.

Three best letters, in order: Henry Hasse, Bob Roberts, and Mrs. Margaret Wells. Sorry, Shaw, I must judge fairly.

I, too, am a Leydenfrost fan. Especially I like his soft charcoal.

I try to use charcoal, too, but when I'm through the shading don't look good and my fingers are all dirty, too.

Must cease this patter, as I must think up a way to get a Delta gun past the detectors.

Sincerely,

RAYMOND WASHINGTON, JR.

P.S.: Anybody got any idea what I'm talking about?

DO STFANS HAVE MINDS?

Moskowitz leads off a really brilliant parade with something new in stf. "Man of the Stars" will not be acknowledged for its restrained writing style because SaM let the heroics get out of hand. Oddly enough, on the other hand, the theory of this man's ideal might not have been so beautifully portrayed if the ordeals he overcame had not been exaggerated. A truly gifted piece of writing, this, and phenomenal after such a brief professional career; Lynch was stirred strongly enough—I like to believe—to the extent of producing his only acceptable drawing to decorate it. Don is excellent when confined to one page and four even borders; let him roam and scramble on two pages and he's atrocious.

Ray Cummings is thrilling in his handling of "Monster of the Asteroid," a state he is seldom in these days. Maybe the plot theory was corny—the writing was inspired, I thought. Ray must have a conscience like Satan to ignore the loyalty of fans who still clamor for his good style after these many years of cheating with mediocre and even unreadable literature. The delight of readers when Cummings is Cummings should activate some glands some place in him—enough, anyway, to instill a bit of originality in his work. Maybe the recent flood of his marvelous reprints has had some miraculous curative power. Paul's pic was also in the mood with the yarn and serves as an object lesson to the majority of new artists. Clearly discernable are thirty humans, twenty machines, the monster, the varied dwellings, the space-ship, Earth and Luna and a mob of misty struggling figures. Then some wonder why we shout long and loud for PAUL. More pics an issue by Paul, say I!

Alan Connell's "Espionage in Space" was a leader in its field of stf., too, although I usually don't care too much for adventurous spy yarns. This had a breathless suspense and vivacity, though, that distinguished it quite adequately from such plots sickeningly featured in some mags I won't and wouldn't—mention.

James Norman, whose talent is suppressed by just such plots and magazines, dashes in a happy fourth with the charmingly clever "A Planet for Your Thoughts." This slapstick style of stf. has tried desperately to invade and stick without too much success. Most authors try too hard or too little—it takes a master chef to sift the ingredients of sophistication and cynicism and end up with gay and whacky developments. Norman fits the bill admirably—whether he meant to or not. I'd enjoy seeing more of Norman—in any mood he chooses—without the stranglehold of editorial suppression and dictation. Morey was magnificent this issue and the best he's been so far in Planet, I guess. After savoring this smooth Leo I'm sure readers will deluge you with requests for more.

S. S. Bond—we call him See-Saw for short—heads the not-so-good stories for the month of November. An "In-again-out-again-Finnigan" author gives me the jitters and the willies. I sit down for an enjoyable session of stf—and pfui, it's awful; I remember last month's mediocre offering and grudgingly "Waste" precious minutes on something that leaves me gasping with delight. The nerves are frazzled no end. Let's look at the Record! (wait 'til I remove my derby here, boys) "Dictator of Time," the only in-between; "The Ultimate Salient"—way up; "Beyond Light"—oh so far down; "The Castaway"—up

there again; "Revolt on Io"—and I thought this was low; "The Ballad of Blaster Bill"—hidden behind them that Novelty Cumulus; "Shadrach"—he almost reached the stratosphere on this one; "The Lorelei Death"—the devil's butcher's delight: hammy and horrid. But then maybe I'm wrong.

Stevens is pretty good artistically and Basil Wells disappointed gigantically after such promising stuff in other mags. His wife's letter was better than the yarn. The Bok cover was swell and No. 1 out of nine printed during October. Paul's was rather garish and was No. 4—sadly—out of nine covers printed during July.

Two factions seem to be growing fast in the Vizigraph and I would like to join their faculties. I too think that the interplanetary plots have been overdone—in spite of the title and the policies of the publishers I ask for something different for a change. I think the readers overlooked that stated policy. I'll also break my firm stand on frequency of publication and ask for a bi-monthly book. The field has been cleared of the fly-by-nights and the need for another worthy mag is evident. I'd like to join that hinted group of "reprinters," too; or was that a red herring.

Lest I forget: Lesser, Shaw and Marlow get those pics this time, with Raym, Maxwell and Stoy giving keen competition—as usual. Washington's poem the time before was extremely enjoyable, much more so than the one he sent to Bill Groveman and which I read on a windy and deserted street-corner—aloud—to the QSFL members, while my golden tresses whipped in the birth-throes of a gale that was soon to sweep Astoria with its devastating might. Maybe the elements couldn't stand the "worse," Raym, or possibly it was my reading. Joking aside, folks, I'd advise you and me to keep an eye on him. And warn Doc Lowndes to beware.

Out of 17 letters there were only 6 who voted, which smells like pretty rotten politics to me—and not from the editorial office either. Wouldn't you consider a separate letter dept for professionals, sales talks for fan-mags and other propositions and announcements, scientific arguments, etc.? And I still don't care to be included in this latter settlement. Asimov's letters are so good but I'm sure he refrains from writing because of his denomination in the field.

The rumor is that Bok and Finley will no longer illustrate for Planet. If this is a fact why not announce the same and eliminate ugly storytelling and gossip. Planet is my fourth favorite mag out of the many and it used to be last. Some climb!

"Dead Man's Planet" by R. R. Winterbotham, "Shadrach" by Bond, "The Star of Satan" by Hasse—another see-saw guy—and the hay-fever story by Gallum were superb in the fall issue and Binder's novel was the stinkiest thing I've ever read. Such gore and halderdash! The two words I despise when applied to stf and fantasy are perfect for this horror: silly and fantastic. I don't care too much for E. E. Smith either, but when they compare the two—I just about pass out. And Binder is usually good, too, darn it.

Well, this turned out to be longer than I at first realized and I'm sorry I kept you so long, but you must realize that I'm now on semi-yearly rations and must include all of my delight at one time. Hope you have room for me.

C. HIDELEY.

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